

on spec

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Leslie Brown

Julia Campbell-Such

Claire Litton

Catherine MacLeod

Will McIntosh

Joanne Merriam

James Moran

Gary Pierluigi

Cat Sparks

Michael Vance

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“Sampan” © Susan Owen Kagan

• The Gremlins Strike Again •

After the last issue of *On Spec* was sent out, we were notified by a few of our subscribers that their copies were incorrectly bound, specifically, that the pagination was all wonky. If you received one of the badly bound issues and have been too polite to tell us, please do let us know and we'll replace your offensive copy immediately.

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Terraforming Terra

Steve Mohn, Fiction Editor

SF readers understand the term *terraform* to mean: planetary engineering. Mars has long been the favorite target of terraform schemes; it's why they keep dousing for water up there. Water vapor is the world's best greenhouse gas, and reengineering the martian climate means warming it, while adding substance to its atmosphere. You're welcome to try. Nobody there to complain about climate change, and Mars has scarcely any climate; its atmospheric energy is so low that any effort would provoke a response.

Down here, not only is our climate packed with energy, there's a lot more of it, a massiveness requiring monumental effort to alter it, an effort that must run for a long time. Never mind which snapshot-ecology we wish to return our planet to: how thick the glaciers, how mild hurricanes were, how abundant rainfall across the Serengeti was in 1920? 1790? 1363? Getting there will take more than changing a light bulb, driving less, recycling more, checking your tires, using less hot water, avoiding products with lots of packaging, adjusting your thermostat or planting a tree. We've been disgorging CO₂ in earnest for 200 years, and methane from ruminant herds for over 10,000. We can halt The Warming only by ceasing emissions. Anything less merely slows it: polar and glacial ice will keep melting—and only if you get everyone to follow through.

We point at China for burning all that coal but SUV sales worldwide hold strong. At the rate arctic ice is melting, we'll have to provide polar bears with paddle boats if we wish to save them; they tire and drown trying to swim between ice masses that are increasingly far apart. But vanishing arctic ice will open that Northwest Passage we read about in school, and allow for drilling out the oil and natural gas believed to lie under it. Russia and Canada could be big winners. Smile if you live in Alberta: you know what having oil money means to a local economy.

Of course, China, like the old Soviet Union, tramples the environment to suit the concerns of citizens who want stuff *now*. How to make them wait for greener cars and air conditioners because, as currently designed, these are bad for our climate? People in China live day by day, as we do, but days are longer when you have to suffer through them. In India and Africa, they are longer still.

Our atmosphere is ten kilometers deep at the cloud tops, an ocean turbulent with storms that smash homes, flood entire cities and sometimes electrocute people. Only an earthquake or a volcanic eruption can match its brute force. Convincing it to cool down will take more than feeling environmentally correct while trading carbon credits for the right to go on making things worse. It will mean terraforming Terra, reengineering the atmosphere. People have not even begun to consider what that actually means.

Most probably, the developed world will get politically greener, while adapting to a warmer world for the plain reason that it can afford to. In Bangladesh, where few can afford much, rising seas will inundate, even eliminate land. We saw Indonesians flee the high water of a tsunami, but when it's always high tide where will Indonesians go? Guys calling themselves Minutemen sit in lawn chairs facing the US-Mexico border with shotguns over their laps, but I worry about them less than I do the lady whose lament I overheard a while back. Floating on a river in her canoe, she saw above the tree line the blades of a windmill propellor. That a windmill should mar her "paddling experience" caused her some dismay. Her moral and social right to enjoy nature felt abridged. She seemed decent enough but she was not ready to sacrifice much. A sense of middle-class entitlement that wants a nice canoe and an iPod soundtrack, but cannot abide the sight of an alternative-energy generator, may prove worse for The Warming than coal-fired power plants in the acquisitive East. •

In 2006 we announced *On Spec's* "In the Shadow of Leviathan" short fiction competition. Featured in this issue is the winning entry *The Laws of Motion* by Catherine MacLeod, as well as *Manna* by Leslie Brown (Honourable Mention). Congratulations to both!

I should tell them about Marty,
but I'm not sure I'll get the
chance and even less sure
there'd be any point.

The Laws of Motion

Catherine MacLeod

A body at rest tends to remain at rest is the first law of motion, a comforting constant in an uncertain life.

But if I don't move soon my rest is likely to be eternal.

I'll be light in an hour and, even as bad as this night has been, I dread sun-up. When I can see my car clearly, I'll have to gather courage I'm not sure I have and run for it.

Twenty feet. I might make it.

Maybe.

And when it's that light I'll be able to see what's left of Marty. I'd rather not. But Marty and I grew up and went through school together; talked about running off to California; talked about running off to anywhere; shared an occasional six-pack and an even more occasional bed. I have to at least *look* at him one last time. He didn't deserve this, and I'm not sure there's anyone else left to give a damn.

My cousin Janie expects me in Toronto tomorrow night. She already has my books, the laptop, Mom's photo albums, and a box of CDs. She used to live here. When I called and asked if I could stay in her spare room she said, "It's about time."

I'm not worried about job-hunting. I can type, take shorthand, balance the books, and keep my mouth shut. This will make me

essential somewhere.

If I'm not there by Tuesday Janie will probably call the police.
Or not. Like I said, she used to live here.

I should tell them about Marty, but I'm not sure I'll get the chance and even less sure there'd be any point. I wouldn't want their job. How do you explain *this* to the next-of-kin?

Out of habit, I wonder if Marty had life insurance. After years of typing up policies it's the first thing I think of when I hear of a death. Then reality hits—of course he didn't. Wake up, Ally.

You can't buy life insurance in Harperton anymore: living here is considered a pre-existing medical condition. Five days ago Doug McPhail gave me my severance pay. I managed to take it with a smile, one he didn't see because he couldn't look me in the face. But he had nothing to be ashamed of—his insurance office is going under like every other business in town.

You can still insure your car, but not your home. You still have to pay property tax, but most of us didn't this year. We couldn't see the fairness of it. How do you assess an abandoned dwelling? How do you place a value on a building that'll never house another family?

How the revenue service will get their share, I don't know. They'll get it somewhere down the road, I'm sure; but far down the road is where most of us will be, and they'll have to find us first.

Whole families vanish in the middle of the night here. They load what'll fit in the back of the half-ton and leave without goodbyes. A few more people go every day, from teens to seniors, artists to factory workers. *Especially* factory workers, which makes me wonder again what they manufacture at Whycorp. Surely I knew once, back in the days when *what* still mattered.

By now they've lost at least a third of their workforce, but they're not hiring. Not that I can imagine anyone wanting to work there now. I swear to God, not even if their kids were starving.

By the end of the year Harperton will be a ghost town. I was raised thinking it's a coward's way to run, but it works for me. I can't fight Whycorp, and if I can get going I'm gone.

I can just make out two of those things, scrapping over something long and shiny-wet. Brawling over breakfast.

He didn't deserve this. And I guess it's too late to give a damn now.
I'm sorry, Marty.

They came last night. Unwanted and unwelcome, but not entirely unexpected.

This whole mess, this self-contained war, started last spring with the fish kills. Most people, including me, blamed Whycorp. As bad as it was, fish kills are common enough—we're a fishing community, too, and we've seen them before—but... these didn't look like any fish we'd ever seen.

Last summer I met Bill Wynn shuffling out of the coffee shop. A refined old gentleman who still calls me Miss Pace, refusing to call an unmarried woman by her first name. He laid a soft, twisted hand on my arm and whispered, "Stay out of the woods now." It'd been a long time since I'd gone for a walk in the woods, but before I could speak he said, "I saw a bear last week. I didn't get a good look at it, mind you —"

"Maybe it was the same one that got in my garbage box."

"—but I think it had scales."

I never doubted him.

The end of last September, and again on Christmas Day, I saw a bluejay in the bird feeder and knew what it was only by its color. I wondered how long would it be before we started harvesting vegetables we didn't recognize.

This is why I can't take my roses with me.

Leaving them breaks my heart. They've been here all my life. I'd take a cutting, but I'm sure whatever comes from the factory has taken its toll on them, too. Next year they might be blue. They might be toxic.

They might be walking.

So these things running around my yard arrived pretty much on schedule.

I didn't notice them for a couple of hours; I was packing the last of my things, mourning the books I couldn't take. My Physics 100 text was on top of the pile. I don't know why I even kept it—some souvenirs I don't need.

I wrapped everything on the kitchen table, that maple monstrosity where my mother peeled vegetables and my grandmother gave birth. The rest of my clothes are in the car, along with a box of essential odds

and ends and my sewing basket. My money's been transferred to a new account in a Toronto bank.

Everything else stays—the TV, my typewriter... I wonder if the others did this, chose what they needed to get by and left the rest. I doubt I'll miss most of it, but I'm sorry to lose my gun. The .22's in the house and I'm not going back for it. I didn't pack it last night because I thought the damp air would be bad for it; I'm glad I had it when I did. It was a gift from my mother, given when I complained about squirrels in the attic. Still, it's no more good to me now: I fired the last of my shells about two a.m.

I spent my last night in the house trying to save a window that'd get smashed the next day. The kitchen window's set too deep to screen, and I balked at the thought of nailing up bars. This last year a cantankerous—and determined—raccoon has been climbing up on the sill and banging at the glass. He's come back so often I named him. Max. Hitting the glass is just contrariness—there's no window box to maul. I don't mind raccoons, but I don't want to wake up with one sitting on my chest.

He came back for a final encore and swiped the pane a good one. A thin break crackled along the bottom.

I ran out the front door and swished the broom across his butt. Thought of taking a shot at him, but I couldn't get a clear sighting and didn't see much point in shooting out the window trying to stop him from breaking it.

At eleven-thirty I forgot about sleep, made coffee and a jam sandwich, and shoved another stick in the stove. I'll miss the wood stove, too—it throws a comfortable, comforting heat, and I know enough about the rest of the world to know such comfort is rare.

The phone rang as I filled my mug. "Hello?"

"Allison, it's Marie. I'm sorry to call so late."

"It's okay, I wasn't sleeping."

"No, I don't suppose you were, dear."

So much for polite chitchat. Her tone of voice said it all: my mother's oldest friend knew I was leaving. I hadn't told her, but still, I've been buying traveler's cheques, emptying the safety-deposit box, gassing the car. My neighbors see everything. I know how their windows shine through the alders, and they never miss my headlights. In small towns people notice your comings and goings, and in Harperton they know

what they mean.

“What can I do for you, Marie?”

“I called to see if you needed anything.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks anyway.” There was a moment of not-quite awkward silence. She’d called to say goodbye, not that anyone ever said it in so many words. “I appreciate your calling, Marie.”

“Allison...?” It was a faint, worried mutter, something I’d never heard from this tiny, graceful woman who cursed like a sailor. “Did you hear Nicole Kendall’s pregnant?”

“Oh, my God!” I yelped. I remembered the bluejay I’d barely recognized. Jerry Kendall worked at Whycorp.

“Jerry quit his job today,” she said. Right, so they’d be packing the car tonight.

“Marie, have you ever thought about... um... taking a vacation?”

“Why, yes, dear. Next week I’m going to visit my son and his wife in Calgary. I haven’t seen the grandkids in quite a while.”

She was getting out. “Well, I hope you have a good visit.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Bye, Marie.”

“Bye, Allison.”

We both waited a few seconds, then hung up.

I sipped indifferent coffee and leaned against the back door. It was nice of her to call, but I couldn’t honestly say I’d miss her; we never socialized. Max I’d miss. In a weird way he’d been faithful company. The closest I ever came to getting him was blowing off the tip of his tail. The battle raged. It was cheaper to lose sleep than to replace a broken window. But at least he was consistent.

It won’t take him long to get in when I’m gone. The house is old and shaky. The roof leaks; the cellar wall’s caving in; the windows are mostly held in place by a thick coat of paint. Last year I found a snake in the siding. It hasn’t been safe for a while. For a long time it’s needed more repairs than I can afford, and it wasn’t worth it, knowing I’d have to leave eventually.

But—a body at rest tends to remain at rest.

I found my copy of “The Association” on top of the fridge and settled down to guard the window. I can always count on Bentley Little to make me lose sleep.

There was a soft *whisper* against the glass and I whipped around. It

was rain, just rain. I kept turning the pages. Left my coffee to cool and forgot about it. My eyes gave out about 1:30.

Max hadn't come back. Maybe I could still score a few hours' sleep.

Sscrraaatttccchhh.

Dammit! I turned to rap the glass, to at least startle him off. My hand stopped in mid-reach.

The thing was fury, the size of a small mutt, with paws like slender hands. Its eyes were three times the size of mine and twice as blue. They watched me intently. Intelligently.

I tapped a fingernail on the glass. It dipped its head, not so much listening as taking a closer look at my hand. I yanked it back.

There was another thing in the driveway. I ran to the dining-room window. There were a half-dozen on the front lawn, one sitting on the cellar hatch, one scraping at the roots of the honeysuckle bush. Without thinking, I yelled, "Cut that out!"

It stopped digging, surprised, but didn't run. The first thing was still tapping on the kitchen window with short, sharp nails.

The scariest thing about them was that I never wondered what they were. We have thousands around here.

I know raccoons when I see them, even when they're done up Whycop-style.

• • •

Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns scare the heck out of me. I don't like the anti-hero. The strong, silent type makes me nervous. But I've seen them all: Marty loved Clint Eastwood.

He loved me, too.

I always told myself our relationship was no great romance. No big deal. But he rented a movie and came to supper every Friday night. He looked up my birth stone and gave me blue topaz earrings for my birthday. He made a point of being around if I needed him.

It was a big deal to Marty.

It was only in the last couple of years I could stand to let him touch me. I don't know how long he'd wanted to. He drove in one fall evening as I was pitching slabs in the woodshed. He watched me chin myself on the door frame and cram the last of the kindling in with my feet.

"Lookin good, Ally."

I swung out and let go, the way we used to exit the monkey bars on the playground. I wasn't surprised when his arms went around my waist to catch me.

I was surprised when they didn't let go.

I let him stay the night. Not because I loved him, but because, at last, I really was that lonely. And sometimes you need what you need.

I needed Marty. Watching him die for me just drove home how much.

The first thing I thought of doing tonight was calling him. I didn't wonder if he was still up. If he knew I was scared he'd get up.

I grabbed the receiver.

The phone was dead.

I ran back to the kitchen and screamed in frustration. Anger at the thing running one claw back and forth along the base of the window, chipping away specks of putty. It jumped down and scuttled out of sight. The things on the lawn scuttled with it.

I pressed my cheek to the glass and looked down at the steps. Just behind the bottom one was a thumb-sized box where the phone line ran into the house. Half-an-inch of frayed wire stuck out of it now. They couldn't have done it on purpose; raccoons don't know what the phone line's for. But even the mutated ones still like to chew things.

None of the other windows were damaged. All the screens were firmly in place. I carried my clothes into the kitchen and fed the stove another stick, one of three left in the woodbox. I could still feel the damp seeping in as I slid into jeans and a warm sweatshirt.

I wondered about the new coons. Your average variety is intelligent, and vicious if cornered, but they prefer running to fighting. They scavenge rather than hunt. I wouldn't bet on that last with these guys. My dad used to say that sometimes paranoia's just itchy wisdom.

Sscrraaattch. I turned, and actually grinned. "Boy, I never thought I'd be glad to see you."

It was Max. He tapped the window once and was *gone*.

There was a thin, high-pitched yowl that stopped my breath. I'd heard it before, when I didn't kill my target with the first shot. It was the scream of an animal that knew it was dead. Six of those things had Max down. Half of him was gone. The other half trailed bloody streamers. Steam rose from the remains.

I don't know how long I stood hunched over the sink. My hands shook as I rinsed my coffee and sandwich down the drain. The new coon was back, its indigo gaze fastened on me.

I said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

It blurted a watery stream of partially-digested Max down the glass.

I fumbled in the tool drawer, rummaging screwdrivers, sandpaper, and twist ties, and found the duct tape. I bit off strips and pressed them over the window, hoping to buy myself some time. The thing tracked my hands and bared its teeth.

"Same to you."

Its head turned suddenly. I heard it, too: a truck coming in. A stand of maples grows between my house and road. Until tonight I always loved the privacy they gave me; but right then I'd have given anything to be in plain sight. Clearing snow out of the driveway by myself is one thing. Facing down the mutant mob is another.

Then I saw the dull gleam as the yard light glinted on Marty's roll bar, and raised a silent cheer as his beat-up half-ton came into view. He glanced up at the phone lines as he cruised past the window. Marty worked for the phone company. He must've tried to call me and realized something was wrong. It dawned on me suddenly I couldn't let him park by the back door.

Then the coon slid off the windowsill and I forgot about saving his tires.

I raced to the back door and pulled it open on the chain. He unfolded his long legs out of the truck. I called, "Hey, Marty, over here."

He didn't see the two coons scampering under his truck. I shrieked, "Marty, look out!" just as he yelled, "Hey, Ally, there's a raccoon on your woodpile! Hey, Alllllliiiieeeeeee—"

I slammed the door and braced my back against it.

He was an animal that knew it was dead, and no way in hell was I going out there. I stood there crying with my hands clapped over my ears for how long I don't know.

• • •

Yesterday I brought home Chinese food and a bottle of wine. I've been living on takeout for the last week. After throwing out some

ancient yogurt, and a jar of Solomon Gundy on the brink of consciousness, I refused to buy more groceries. There's nothing in the fridge but a couple of spring rolls and a half-carton of chow mein.

The sangria never made it into the house: the bottom of the plastic bag split before I even got to the doorstep. I cleaned up the glass, but backed my car to the other side of the woodpile just to be safe.

Safe. Did I really just use that word?

Marty would probably argue that one.

I don't remember when he stopped screaming. I don't recall getting the .22 or loading it. I opened the door just far enough to slip the barrel out.

I couldn't see Marty, for which I was obscenely grateful.

I knelt stiffly. The first time one of those little monsters showed his head I was going to blast it off.

Curr! and it was *there*, shoving on the door. I pushed my knee against it, and we stared at each other through the gap. It had a burned-peanut smell, like wet cigarettes. Its face and paws were dark with blood.

I sighted one blue eye. It chirred softly, maybe in puzzlement, and I blew its face off. There was a satisfying *splat* and the door was patterned with backsplash. I reloaded *Cheerruu* and fired point-blank. A second thing exploded. I shot a third and slammed the door, crying and hating myself for it. Out of shells with six more coons out there. That I could see.

One clawed at the door and my backbone prickled. It was the thickness of the door—two inches—away from me. I thought, *Oh, just whack the damned thing!*

I yanked the door open on the chain. The coon stuck its head in. I rammed my hip against the door, catching its throat against the jamb, gagging it. Eventually its eyes clouded over. I shoved it outside with the gun barrel.

And groaned as the lights went out.

The yard light fizzled pink and faded. The ceiling bulb went with a soft *pop*.

There was always noise in the house—fridge humming, baseboard heaters clicking. It took a moment to adjust to the silence.

I groped my way into the kitchen. I keep a flashlight on the sideboard. Most of us do; outages are nothing new here. We expect them

in the winter—and on Saturday night. A drunk driver wrapping his car around a light pole is the usual cause. Though about ten years ago one of the local high school kids climbed into the substation on a bet. Took them a while to get his body cleaned out. Harperton was in the dark for three days.

This was a lousy time to be without light. Then again, when would be good? If I wasn't under siege this would be a weekend like any other.

I very carefully sat down. The thing at the window licked its lips. I half-expected it to grin. I looked past it at the alder field, missing Harold's yard light and the gleam from Sheila's porch.

I took a moment to be afraid for them.

And then my brain left without me.

Maybe I went into shock. Or passed out from exhaustion. I woke up drooling on *Elementary Physics*, and threw it in the wood box in case I needed kindling.

The second law of motion: *When a body is acted upon by a constant force, its resulting acceleration is inversely proportional to the mass of the body, and is directly proportional to the applied force.*

I understand that, but could never express it very well—one of those facts of life you just live with. I'm sure I would've managed it by exam time, but I never even made it to midterms. I do grasp the notion of constant force, though. Like corrosion.

War.

Whycorp.

I recall a time when the factory wasn't here, but I was a very young child. For most of my life it's been a *presence*, casting all kinds of shadows on the town. You almost expect the building to be some gothic abomination. But it's just a regular atrocity, quite modern. There's some strange poetry in the fact that it terminates a dead end street.

We don't know what they make. Some insist they make pharmaceuticals, a reasonable theory—certain drugs can make terrible changes in a body. Others say some kind of weapon, and that makes more sense to me—seems like chemical warfare would be right up Whycorp's alley. Maybe they've been less than careful with their waste disposal lately. It might explain the mutations.

Maybe they don't feel the need for care anymore. Harperton's done. Whycorp's almost through with us.

You can't ask the factory workers what they're doing. They have to sign confidentiality agreements when they hire on. I've sometimes wondered if they sign in blood. They cash their handsome paycheques and go grey prematurely. They grow old before they grow old. They die before they die.

But they stay. A body at rest tends to remain at rest. It's hard to pull up deep roots. Ours must be like kudzu.

What's happened to this town feels like rape.

I needed something to nail over the windows. I didn't have any boards, but there was a roll of chicken wire in the basement. I used to nail it on the woodshed so the roses could climb. I opened the cellar door. There was a soft skittering on the stairs, and a terrible glitter of blue.

I slammed the door and hauled the dining room table against it. Its legs shook, much like mine. Maybe they'd broken the cellar window. I never screened it. The glass was thick and it was too small for a person to crawl through, really just an air vent to dry the dirt floor. They could've forced their way through the bigger splits in the basement wall, or maybe clawed their way through the cellar hatch.

More scrabbling at the window. Two coons on the sill, jabbing their claws through the putty. The fur around their mouths had dried in stiff spikes.

The window shuddered. There was no way to booby-trap the house, and I couldn't fight them. I had no way to protect myself when they came in, and wouldn't get far if I ran.

But... maybe I didn't *need* to get far. Twenty-five feet to Marty's truck. Okay, *he* didn't make the distance, but then, he didn't know what he was up against. His door was still open. He'd pulled in facing the woodpile. If he'd turned it would've been a straight sprint to the cab; but no, I'd have to go around.

I found my belt pack on the sideboard and checked it quickly—cash, bank card, ID, car keys—and strapped it on. I pulled an old warmup jacket over my head. Whatever else I'd been planning to take was staying.

I grabbed the flashlight as I ran for the door. Thought a last good-bye to my house.

Marty never said goodbye. He always said, "I'm outta here."

I slipped the chain and was out. Coon on my right. If I went

around the truck I was going to lose a leg. For some dumb reason I thought of Julie Andrews running across a flowered meadow in *The Sound of Music*. It didn't seem quite... appropriate, somehow.

Linda Hamilton running from the semi in *The Terminator*.

Much better.

I blew the last of my adrenaline: put on a final burst of speed and jumped, grasped the roll bar and yanked myself up, hit the roof on my side and rolled.

I heard *skwaaaaanngg* and a sharp tremor ran up my arm—a coon came over the hood and clamped the flashlight out of my hand. *Missed me*, I thought, and had a sudden clear vision of one under the truck, waiting for my feet to hit the dirt.

I drew up my knees, grabbed the other end of the roll bar, and swung.

My tucked body came down in a fast arc. I landed in the truck cab and hauled the door shut as a coon poked its head in. The door caught it across the neck. My fingers on the handle were inches from its mouth.

It wasn't going down easy. I couldn't pull hard enough on the small handle to choke it. I held on with one hand and groped the passenger seat with the other. Marty never cleaned out his truck; there had to be something to kill it with.

Bottle opener. I went for the eyes and it stopped struggling. I opened the door and let it plop out on the ground. It fell on two more waiting their turn.

I shut the door. Started the truck. There was a half-pack of roll-me-owns on the dashboard. I pushed in the lighter. I quit smoking years ago, but I needed something to calm me down. My body was rigid between the seat and floor boards. Give it a minute, maybe I'd unknot. I turned on the dome light, glad of the small orange glow.

The rain picked up. I reached for a cigarette, and screamed as something bumped under the seat. There was a coon behind me, stuck in the space where Mike kept his tool box. I'd wedged it there while I was wrestling its friend.

This wasn't like one of those slow-motion nightmares, where you know it's a dream but can't do anything about it. I knew this was real and it was *still* a nightmare.

The cigarette lighter popped. I grabbed it as the coon wriggled

free. Lighter into one huge blue eye. It scratched at my arm, but didn't rip the jacket. I lowered the window enough to heave it out.

And thought, *Okay, good, you're safe.* God, that's a stupid word. I thumped my fist on the passenger seat to check for hitchhikers, then sat back and dragged a deep breath. *You're doing all right, Ally. Just drive around the woodpile. Pull up by the car. You're going to be fine.*

I put the truck in gear.

It quit.

Something else Marty never did: fill the gas tank.

• • •

Harperton wasn't always like this. I remember the river in summer, running like molten sunshine. Janie and I playing tag in fields of buckwheat taller than we were. A west wind so sweet you took your wash off the line with tears of gladness.

We welcomed the factory with open arms, needing jobs, not knowing it'd leech the life out of us like a vampire sucking blood. Vampires *have* to be welcomed in, don't they?

Marty's dad sat right in our kitchen and said Whycorp would change all our lives. He hanged himself the year after they hired him, his last paycheque still in his shirt pocket. Changed his life, all right.

Changed Marty's, too.

Marty wanted to be a veterinarian. Was forever bringing home injured strays. After he became the head of the family that dream went on hold. He worked every kind of odd job you could imagine, and a few you probably couldn't, but no way in hell would he go to the factory. He wanted to go to college, but after a while some dreams stay that way.

He never forgave me for dropping out, and I never told him about the freshman who tackled me outside the library at closing time—that nice quiet boy who sat behind me in Physics 100. I didn't talk about being too scared to fight back, or how I came home rather than face him again.

I didn't say the cops caught him two rapes later, or that his women were really victims of my own cowardice. Marty might've understood. Or he might've viewed me with contempt, and it was hard enough handling my own. Because I needed his company, I never really let

him know me, and I withheld the truth to keep him coming back. Not the kindest thing I could've done.

Sometimes I think I feel myself eroding from the memory of my weakness. Constant pressure. Applied force.

Now and then he just looked at me with exasperation and said, "What's it gonna take to get you off your ass? Why don't you ever go anywhere?"

He meant why didn't I go out at night. I've never quite got over my fear of the dark, within or without. And being a coward is a lonely business—if I didn't go anywhere I didn't have to come home alone.

There were a lot of things I couldn't say to Marty.

I'm not even sure I could've said goodbye.

• • •

Third law: *For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.*
Push me now and I push back.

I never dreamed I'd have to be pushed this hard.

First glimmer of sunlight through the bare trees. One last look at my house. I used to think it was my security; that when I finally got the guts to leave I could sell it for traveling money. But now, with the rivers contaminated, our wells are following suit. Property values are a joke.

So much for security.

I wonder why Marty tried to call me tonight. Most likely he'd heard I was leaving. Maybe he was angry with me for not telling him. Maybe he wanted to come with me. Or he might've just said goodbye and let me go, which is more than I had the guts to do for him. He stayed here because of me. If I'd been braver he might've made it to California.

I lived here with yellowing curtains and fading wallpaper, and chipped dishes I didn't replace because there was no point. The house crumbled around me, and Marty kept talking about going *somewhere*. I wanted to go. I was just too scared to take that first step.

Now I know what it takes to get me off my ass.

There's a coon in the rearview mirror. And a forty-year-old woman with wide eyes, fair skin, thin nose. Blue topaz studs. I used to wonder why Marty stuck around; I don't look like anything special. And he was stubborn, but not stupid. There had to have been moments when he

at least suspected I didn't love him back.

But he never could resist a wounded animal.

I'd like to wound a few. I see two heading out the driveway. One behind the truck. One sitting on the back step wrapped in something pink and dripping. I'd like to flamenco the little bastard.

We have coyotes in these parts. Where are they when you need them?

What are they now?

I can't imagine. I don't want to. Max was two, not old for a raccoon; probably one of the last normals around. These are the right size to be last year's litter. Whycorp's offal is infecting the new generation.

Nicole Kendall's pregnant. Dear God.

My teeth are chattering. I can't believe Marty didn't carry a blanket. I can't believe some of the stuff he had crammed under the seat. What the heck was a telephone repairman doing with a crowbar?

Still looking out for me.

I can see my car clearly. And four raccoons. I don't know that there are more under the truck, but I'd say it's best to assume. I'll never make it if I go around the woodpile. Running over it is another matter. Been doing that since I was a kid. I'm sure of my footing there.

I need to go. I want this to be over with. I'm tired of racing from one drafty old wreck to another. I'm tired of cowering in the dark.

I can't picture what the town looks like this morning. It's so quiet. Not even birdsong.

I wonder if the factory will move on when we do. I always thought you couldn't fight Whycorp, but I was wrong. Tonight I pushed back. I think the only way to win this war is to get out alive, but that's okay.

The crowbar has a good heft, and I can hit the ground running.

Goodbye, Marty.

I'm outta here. •

He had wealth as the tribe used to reckon it, but in time of famine, the only currency of worth was food.

Manna

Leslie Brown

In her open palms, Rahal held all the food that was left in their tent: a few grains of barley, some parsley root, four figs and a chicken bone that had already been through two soups. At the back of the tent, Shimon, her husband, shifted on his pallet and her despairing gaze went to him. He was frailer than he had been only a few days ago. She rose stiffly on joints swollen from malnutrition. She felt a loose tooth in the back of her mouth. Old age had claimed most of Shimon's teeth and Rahal felt with hopeless outrage that, at the age of fifteen, she would soon be as toothless as he, should she live long enough to have them all fall out.

She tipped the clay pot that held their water to feel its weight. It was low; she had best make the trip to the well now, in the cool of early morning; she might not have the strength to do so later in the day. She poured the water from the jar into her water skin and hung it from the forked stick in the middle of the tent, where Shimon could see it if he woke up thirsty before she returned, and left with the jar.

A strange taint hung in the morning air. Rahal sniffed suspiciously. Had some drunken young man relieved himself against

the flap of her tent? Or had the winds changed early in the season and were now blowing a strange odor of the deep desert over the camp? A dim memory of her life before the tribe surfaced: it smelled like the fish stalls in the city where she had once lived with her mother. She made her way down the steep path, past the scattering of tents. No one else was yet awake. She rounded the final rocky outcrop and frowned in puzzlement at the low wall of stones that encircled the well to keep small children from falling in. Oddly, the well now lay in deep shade, yet there had been nothing near it to cast a shadow. She lifted her eyes, then fell to her knees in terror. Her clay jar smashed on the rocks.

"O Ishtar, save Thy daughter! Help me, do not let me die!" she begged, praying, in her extremity, to her mother's goddess. Slowly, through her terror, she realized that nothing had happened. She uncovered her eyes and stared at the dark mass by the well. It was a creature. It had eyes, a mouth, teeth. It was three men tall at its highest part, and like a serpent, in that it had no legs but did not resemble any snake of the desert that she knew. Its length she could not determine; she suspected it might stretch from the well to the tent of the headman, Ayol.

The creature was not moving. If it had once breathed as did other living things, it was not breathing now. She stood on shaking legs and approached the massive form gingerly, poised to flee at the slightest provocation. The smell was strong this close, yet the monster did not stink of dead flesh. She stood facing its glaring amber eye, and looked into its depths. The eye was filmy, and this persuaded her more than anything that the creature was indeed dead. Growths like fingers hung over the eye, each as big around as her arm. Rahal touched one. The texture was smooth and the flesh very cold. Again a childhood memory surfaced, this time of the eels dangling from the eelmonger's racks. She prodded the skin beside the eye. The flesh dimpled and retained the imprint of her finger. The monster appeared to be grey in colour, but when she angled her head slightly waves of iridescence appeared. She circled the head and stopped in surprise once she had rounded the muzzle. There was no other eye. The whole side of the creature's head was gone, exposing the remains of its brain. The white rim of skull was grooved in places, as if by teeth or a raptor's beak.

Rahal trembled at the thought of a creature that could overcome the monstrosity lying before her.

A movement froze Rahal in primal panic. Her eyes searched frantically and she saw a semi-feral dog, a successful escapee from the camp cooking pots, sniffing the mash of brain and bone splinters. Its pink tongue flicked out to lick the blood and ooze but then it whined and backed off. It rubbed its muzzle with a forepaw then trotted away.

Rahal, troubled, hurried back up the path to Ayol's tent and jangled the string of bells that hung by the flap.

"Headman, come quickly!"

Ayol's wife, Eliora, snatched back the flap and snarled.

"Do not beg here! We have nothing to give."

"I'm not begging. I must speak to Ayol." Rahal danced from foot to foot, trying to see past Eliora into the tent.

"You speak to him when he holds an audience." Eliora pulled the flap shut. Rahal grabbed the skin and yanked it wide again in front of the woman's astonished face.

"Headman!" Rahal shouted.

"What?" Ayol's harsh voice cut from the darkness within.

"By the well! A creature! One hundred cubits long! You must come see!"

"Did you wake from some silly dream, girl?"

"No. Please come see!"

Eliora shut the flap with a spiteful glare. Querulous voices rose from nearby. Rahal had roused them with her cries. Ayol abruptly stepped out of his tent, dressed in a robe. In his hand was a knife. He seized her arm in a bruising grip.

"Show me."

Ayol marched her down to the well. Rahal prayed that the creature had not vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, else surely the headman would strike her down. Her shoulders sagged in relief as they rounded the outcrop and saw the vast bulk before them. Ayol released her arm and sank to his knees, exactly as she had done.

"O God, You have shown us Your mercy! I thank You! You have not forgotten us, Your people!"

Ayol stood and said, "I must gather the men and tell them to

bring knives, axes and other tools for the rending of flesh. We must hurry and get this meat cooking on fires or onto the drying racks."

Rahal shook her head. "Honoured Headman, there was a dog that would not touch the flesh. A starving stray dog—he spurned it."

"We are not dogs. God meant this bounty for us, not for animals. Manna, it is. The Lord has sent us manna."

Ayol left and Rahal turned to the monster. She still could not see it as food. The dog had spurned the meat. Her mother had taught her to eat only what the birds ate, and never touch water the antelope avoided. Every instinct told her this flesh was poison.

But touching the creature had not seemed to hurt her. Again she ran her palm along the smooth hide. It was still cool but not like before. Ayol was right: The flesh would soon spoil. All over the hide was studded with outgrowths like those around the eyes, but Rahal could not guess at their purpose. About a third of the way down was a set of longer flesh spars, tightly folded against the side of the creature. Rahal tugged slightly at the longest one, a thin transparent membrane that joined the spars and reminded her of a bat's wing. Yet how could something this large fly?

Excited voices preceded the men of the tribe, armed with all sorts of cutting implements. A few paused to exclaim in wonder and kneel in prayer, but Ayol hauled them upright.

"Give thanks later, over your meal tonight. Now, the body spoils. If we do not attend to it, we will offend God."

The men set about hacking at the creature. Big pieces of blue grey skin peeled off, revealing thick white fat.

"Make yourself useful, girl," snarled Abram and, shoving the haft of a knife into Rahal's hand, pushed her towards the creature. She slipped in the blood spilled by the torn flesh. Abram set back to his work and Rahal left the knife on the ground and backed away. At the bottom of the path, she turned to flee but met the women coming down, singing hymns of thanks as they brought baskets and sleds to carry meat back up to the cook fires. Some, when they saw Rahal, made the sign against the evil eye. Malka, to Rahal's surprise, turned on these women.

"Show respect for one who discovered God's bounty! She has proved herself a blessing, not a curse."

"Who says I am a curse?" demanded Rahal angrily.

"Ignore them." Eliora shoved one of her baskets into Rahal's arms. "Bring your own baskets down later. Use mine. Don't start any fights."

"She started it." Rahal nodded at Malka, but Eliora caught her arm and hissed in a low voice: "Finding the manna was chance, not God's blessing on you, and we both know that." She pushed past Rahal towards women already loading meat into baskets. Shocked by Eliora's open animosity, Rahal followed slowly. If Eliora ever found out that Rahal was not a true wife to Shimon, that he had never taken a husband's rights with her, the small protection that her marriage afforded her might be withdrawn. Glumly, she lifted chunks of skin, fat and a small portion of flesh into a basket until it was almost too heavy to lift, then trudged up the hill behind the others. At the cook fires, Eliora directed that some meat be placed on sticks over the fire while fat and skin should boil in pots of water.

"The men need food right away, so they can finish their task," the headwoman said. When the meat was done, Rahal took some down to the men. Ayol and the men stopped their work to gather round. As headman, Ayol would taste the strange meat first. He stripped the cooked flesh from one stick and rolled it between his fingers to examine the texture, then smelled it. He touched his tongue to it and looked thoughtful. The men and Rahal watched his every move intently. Ayol shook his head and the shoulders of the watchers sagged. Then, with a laugh he popped it into his mouth and chewed vigourously.

"I think this is fine manna!" he declared.

"The stray dog didn't think so," Rahal whispered, but nearly fell under the press of men snatching skewered meat from her basket.

Exhausted by their labours, and having disassembled the corpse by only a third, the men stopped at dusk. The women had cooked up a fine feast and set slabs of flesh on racks to be smoked and dried.

"Here, girl, you've worked hard today." Ayol shoved a bowl of stew into her hands. Rahal ducked her head.

"I must take this to Shimon, before I eat," she said.

"A good wife, Rahal, is a spring in the driest desert," he proclaimed, drawing an evil glance from Eliora. Rahal fled to her tent before Ayol could further provoke his wife, took the bowl to the midden bucket, and was about to empty it when Shimon groaned on his pallet.

"Rahal. What is it I smell? All day, I've dreamed of lamb stew."

Ayol and the men had sampled the monster hours ago and shown no ill effects. Perhaps that misbegotten dog had had the foaming madness. She had seen animals in the grip of that curse turn even from water.

"Yes, Shimon. Your god has sent manna from heaven in the form of a monstrous snake with wings. The tribe has cut it up and eaten its flesh. I have brought you some."

"Rahal, you tell the best tales. Is it mutton? Bring it here." Energized by the smell of stew, Shimon propped himself on one elbow and beckoned impatiently. Rahal placed the bowl in his hands but held on.

"I'm telling you, husband. You must know: I fear to eat it. I believe it to be unclean."

"Child, you are too cautious. It is your mother in you. How can anything that smells this good be unclean?"

Rahal watched in dismay as he scooped the stew into his mouth.

"More, Rahal." He shoved the bowl back at her. She took it silently and returned to the communal cook pot. Was she wrong to spurn the manna? Her stomach ached with hunger. Yet every instinct railed against eating this food. She humbly approached Eliora and her friends and stood waiting for them to acknowledge her.

Eliora asked, "What is it, Rahal?"

"The stew is too rich for Shimon. Does anyone have some parsley root or dried antelope to spare, until he is strong enough to keep the manna down?"

"I do," said Malka. Generous in the face of plenty, she went to her storage baskets and came back with a bunch of parsley roots. Rahal accepted them, careful to conceal her dismay that Malka had been hoarding food while, not ten cubits from her tent, Shimon lay starving. Rahal took another bowl of stew, ostensibly

for herself. In their tent, Shimon eagerly accepted the bowl. Rahal chewed parsley roots. Her fears would be allayed only if Shimon and the rest of the tribe grew strong on the manna.

That night the tribe, given new hope, gave praise to their god. To Rahal's surprise, Shimon wanted to enjoy the celebration, and walked down to the big fire leaning on Rahal heavily. Fat from the creature, made crunchy by the fire, was passed and Rahal pantomimed tasting it. When the celebration ended, she walked Shimon back to the tent and made to help him onto his pallet.

He waved her away. "I can do it, wife!"

She brought him a gourd to make water in before he slept but he threw it across the tent.

"I don't need help pissing, woman. Stop treating me like an old man." He tossed himself down on the pallet and Rahal retreated, eyes wide, to the other side of the tent. What magical properties did manna have, that it could turn an old man on death's door into a spry, ill-tempered goat? Never had he spoken to her so. From the time he had picked up the grieving seven-year-old girl from beside the body of her mother, left where she had fallen by the caravan master, Shimon had been a loving father to her. When Hadass, Shimon's wife, had died, it had not been suitable for a widower to have a young woman unrelated by blood in his tent, so the easiest thing to do was marry. He had always given her the respect due to a wife, even if he was unable to fully be a husband to her.

Still, despite the meat's effect on Shimon's temper, she would eat of it tomorrow and ease her hunger. Why should only the rest of the tribe benefit? The manna must truly be food from heaven.

In the night Rahal woke struggling under the weight of a man. She tried to scream but a sweaty palm covered her mouth.

"Hush, wife. Pull up your robe, open your legs." Shimon fumbled at her breech clout and Rahal reflexly shut her thighs tight, imprisoning his hand. He slapped her with the other.

"Stop that. Do your duty. That food has made me as potent as a young bull. Now open!"

Rahal opened her legs and Shimon pressed home painfully. To keep silent she bit her hand. When he was done, he grunted and heaved himself off of her. Shuffling back to his pallet, he

flopped down and started to snore. Rahal lay on her back, staring into the dark. Tears ran from the corners of her eyes and she brushed at them angrily. Shaking, she stood to clean herself as best she could with a cloth and cold water. That is not the Shimon I know, she thought. He had hurt her. The meat was indeed tainted.

Not wishing to be in the tent with Shimon any longer, she ducked out into the faint light of dawn. Her stumbling steps led her back to the carcass. She grew aware of a pale glow given off by the body, so faint she saw it only if she looked from the corner of one eye. Was it kin to the moon that it should give off such a light?

A noise from the camp made Rahal cock her head. People were screaming. Rahal saw the knife she had dropped the day before and snatched it up. Had a rival tribe learned of their good fortune and come raiding? Rahal ran to the camp.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

Malka turned to her and Rahal recoiled. Fleshy fingers, like what had hung over the creature’s amber eye, covered the woman’s face. Malka’s glance fell on Rahal’s knife and she snatched it up, grabbed a handful of fleshy knobs and drew the knife across them sharply. Her scream cut through the camp as blood poured down her face.

Rishona seized Rahal’s arm. “Am I different too?” she demanded. “Do I look like Malka?”

“Your eyes...” stuttered Rahal.

“What about them—what?” Rishona shook Rahal.

“They’re gold, like the creature’s.”

“You lie!” Rishona struck Rahal.

Now the men stumbled out of their tents, roused by the screams and wailing. Rahal stared at Ayol, trying to realize what was wrong, then saw that his arms were shorter, coming now only to his waist. Extrusions hung from his face as well and his eyes were gold.

“The meat was unclean,” shouted Eliora. “We should never have eaten it.” Her wild glance fell on Rahal. “You. Bitch. You found the monster yet you are unchanged. Why?”

As one, the tribe turned to Rahal, eyeing her closely. Ayol made to grab her but missed, misjudging the reach of his shorter

arm. Rahal stepped back to prevent his trying again and scanned the angry faces. Not one person there was unmarked by the feast.

“Rahal, why are you unchanged?” Ayol wailed.

“I didn’t eat the meat,” she said in a whisper.

“What—what did you say?”

She replied in a louder voice, “I did not eat the meat. I told you, a stray dog spurned it. I was afraid to eat. I prayed to Ishtar, not your god, to save me and She did!”

“Rahal knew,” said Rishona.

“She knew!” screamed the tribe. Rahal fled.

The transformed people were slow and clumsy and Rahal made it to the old cliff tombs: narrow shelves scraped into a red sandstone cliff, where only scraps of bone and pottery remained. Rahal scaled them easily, climbing high. A thrown rock hit one leg but only bruised. She paused on a wide ledge and looked down. The people milled in anger at the base of the cliff. Some tried to climb but fell back. A man threw a stone which, on the bounce, hit Ayol’s temple. Ayol turned on the man who had thrown it and beat him. Others leaped into the fight. Malka slapped Rishona and suddenly the women were fighting too. Shrill cries echoed off the cliff face. As she watched, the fighting slowed as the combatants tired. Ayol shuffled towards the tents and the tribe followed as if dazed.

Rahal sat on the ledge and pondered her next move. She could wait for nightfall and slip back into camp for a water skin, raid Malka’s storage baskets then leave. Better to brave the desert than a camp of angry people turning into hideous things.

Tormented all day by hunger and thirst, Rahal kept to the shade, climbing or descending to different ledges to avoid the sun. Nothing moved in the camp and she wondered if she had been wrong to wait for night. What if the tribe, in their new form, preferred the light of the moon? Finally, the sun slid below the horizon. The camp remained dark. She felt her way down the cliff, poking blindly with her feet to find each ledge, then moved silently through the camp, making for Malka’s baskets. Malka had left them outside and Rahal filled a sack she found nearby with parsley root and dried antelope. She looked at her own tent, silent like the others. Her hope was slim that Shimon was

untouched but before she left, Rahal had to see.

Cautiously, she lifted her tent flap. Familiar snoring came from the pallet as well as a faint, pale light, too dim to see by. She felt for flints and a tallow stick, retreated outside and struck a spark into some kindling. Lighting the stick from the small fire, she crept back into her tent. The water skin she had filled earlier seemed untouched and she thanked her luck as she slipped it onto one shoulder. She raised the candle high.

Shimon, naked on his pallet, had shrunk to half Rahal's own size. His arms and legs had retracted into his body, and his hands and feet were mere stubs, as if they too would soon disappear. Fleshy protrusions studded his entire body and he gave off the same pale glow as the monster's corpse. His face was still his own but, as she leaned in for a closer look, two golden eyes opened.

He squalled, an unearthly shriek, and thrashed on his pallet. Rahal dropped her candle. Cries rose from other tents and Rahal fled headlong into a horror of people squirming out of tent flaps and flopping on their bellies, all giving off that faint white glow. Rahal ran for the cliff but too many people blocked her. The path to the well was still clear and she ran down to the rocky outcrop near the well, which might put her out of reach. She scrambled up its rough sides and turned to look back.

The entire village was coming down the path, a seething mass of phosphorescence.

As they milled at the foot of the outcrop, Rahal wished desperately for a knife. Something that might have been Ayol was inching up the rocks toward her. Rahal picked up a stone the size of her fist and threw it hard. It bounced off Ayol's blunt head and he shrilled in rage. He tried again and Rahal eased a boulder into place, which made him back away, but another tried charging the outcrop from behind her and she shoved the boulder down. He squalled in pain and blood sprang from his neck. Ayol charged him and fastened his teeth to the wound, gnawing the flesh. His victim flailed but could not shake off Ayol. Others turned on the wounded tribesman and buried him under their ravening bodies.

They will eat me! Rahal realized in horror, and readied a few more stones, unwilling to think about what might happen if she ran out of ammunition.

Rahal huddled on the top of the outcrop. With red rimmed eyes, she stared at the light below, which shifted and bobbed as the people milled about. But, by dawn's full light, they did not look like people anymore. All were now miniature copies of the dead monster. If Shimon was among them, Rahal could not tell him apart.

Suddenly, there was a noise like a ram's horn blown at full blast. Like a grey storm cloud, a new manna-creature flew in, low over the desert. Sandstorms rose at each beat of its wings. It circled them once and Rahal saw how the body's coils bunched tightly behind the membranous wings. It landed beside the corpse of the other creature and folded its wings, calmly surveyed the people with amber eyes then turned to the pile of dead flesh and tore a chunk of meat from the back, chewing it much as a goat would chew cud. Had that gaping maw delivered the earlier death blow to its sibling? Mate? The people too crowded around the dead creature and fed voraciously. Rahal crouched down on her rock to make herself inconspicuous but saw the creature's golden eyes turn towards her. It made no move to attack but only swallowed its mouthful then turned toward the tribe and bellowed.

The people pulled their buried faces from the flesh and looked up. The creature bellowed again and the tribe surged towards it. Each person went to a protrusion and wrapped around it. Again the larger monster's eyes turned towards Rahal.

She knew what was wanted of her. *Eat the meat. Be one with us. Come.* She shook her head at the monster, doubting that it would understand the gesture, and said:

"I stay here. I stay as my mother and father, whoever he may be, made me. My Goddess will keep me safe, not betray me, as did the god of these people!"

The wings spread wide and threw Rahal into shadow. She flung herself flat as the creature rose above the camp and flew off into the distance from which it had come. Below, the camp lay empty.

"I can survive," she said aloud. "I can trek to the camp of the windy-mountain people. I will tell them I was born of this tribe and be less of an outsider there than I was here. I will warn them to spurn manna that drops from the sky!"

As she watched the grey shape diminish towards the horizon, the dog appeared from behind the well and stared at her with lolling tongue, as if laughing at her. Then she felt, as delicate as the touch of a butterfly's wings, a stirring in her womb. •

• • •

Thou didst crush the heads of the Leviathan, thou didst give him for food to the desert people.

Psalms 74:14

Vivian had been dead for ninety years when I met her.

The Boatman

Joanne Merriam

The street is full of noise. Abandoned cars rust in the middle of the highway, thronged by people on bicycles, most of them shouting. Overheads flicker off and on as they sway in the stiff breeze. I walk close to the buildings, one hand on a wall to keep my bearings in the seconds of darkness, and the other hand on my hood to obscure my face. Clanking at my belt are bags of coins I have to deliver before I can go home to Vivian.

Wind is coming from the lands of the living and carries with it their heavy, green scent. Patches of fog fly northward, lit by overheads, and then disappear into the higher darkness.

Vivian had been dead for ninety years when I met her. She was at one of Frank's parties, holding forth on her life's successes: the non-existent Pulitzer, the imagined groupies slitting their wrists in the mountains when she died; and when she saw me she said, "Hey, Charon, back me up and I'll buy you a drink." I swore to her lies and she brought me the ghost of a 1962 Château Léoville-Poyferré.

That wine was something else. The living can't perceive it, and the dead think it's just wine: only I can drink it and feel its crêpe-thin rosy wings scraping down the throat.

There's a story that goes: My mother, Nyx, the primordial goddess

of the night, and my father, Erebus, the personification of darkness, were also brother and sister. I was stillborn; my mother wept; I came to life from the magic in her tears' touch. When I grew to manhood, my grandfather employed me to bring him the dead.

The truth is, my mother became pregnant at fifteen by her uncle—unwillingly, I hasten to add, since she wasn't a goddess and therefore in the habit of sleeping with her relatives—and was driven from her household, and gained employment as a maid, and was often beaten, and began to have what she thought were prophetic dreams. When I was nine years old, she took me to a cave locally famous for minor miracles: a few people had lain there in fevers and come out well, and some had claimed to have seen the gods. She said she'd had a dream, and took me by my thin arms and propelled me inside, and let me go. Shadows surrounded me, and pulled at my clothes, and led me deeper inside. When I looked back, she was staring past me deeply into the shadows and clutching the chest of her shift with one narrow hand.

I saw her only once after that, when I ferried her across the river. She was crying large silent tears that left tracks in her dirty, set face. She didn't recognize me, though she smiled when I held her shaking hands.

Frank was Vivian's best friend in life, the one man she kept around after ending their affair, which predated her one marriage. (Her husband always assumed that Frank was gay, and because he delighted in subterfuge, Frank encouraged this.) They died from the same car accident on Academy Street, on their way to the Shoeless Joe Jackson House, which Frank had always wanted to see. A cat ran in front of the car, and Vivian swerved to avoid it, full speed into a short leaf pine. Her 1991 yellow Geo crumpled like so much aluminum foil, crushing her chest. Frank, who had forgotten to fasten his seat belt, was thrown from the car. His forehead broke his flight, and he lay in a coma for twenty-two days.

Vivian is what her mother's generation would have called a character—unusual, unpretty features that added up to beauty, and an almost crazed inability to stick to the truth. She didn't tell me that I reminded her of her late husband, though once or twice she forgot herself and called me Harold. He was a real estate salesman, and an amateur and very bad poet. He was the sort of man nobody dared to take the liberty of calling Harry. He went straight to paradise without

stopping here.

I go into the temple. From the outside it looks like an abandoned warehouse, and is ringed around with windows covered in dirt, cobwebs and dead bugs. Inside it looks much the same, though the windows are clean and there's an old, bare altar—just a raised part of the floor, really—and some dusty jewel-toned wall hangings that depict fleshy young women carrying baskets of grapes. I lay bag after bag of coins on the altar, slipping them from my belt one by one. I do this every day. When I am done, I leave. I do not pray.

The day she moved in with me, it was snowing. We get all sorts of weather here, except unfiltered sunshine. Snow settled on everything, half-melting into a stubborn slush, weighing down the electrical wires and the branches of the ghosts of trees. Occasionally one of those branches would bow enough to drop its load onto the ground with a wet thud. We watched it fall and listened to the shrieks of children who died young, making snow angels in the distance. I was cold, and Vivian leaned the ghost of her warmth against me and said, "I love you," and I kissed her, and she started sleeping at my apartment instead of Frank's.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I went hang-gliding over Lake Erie?" Vivian asked me two years into our affair, when she'd never left South Carolina her whole life. She said on a foggy day you could fly through the clouds and feel their condensation on your skin. She said the best part was just after she lifted off, when she was still soaring upward, just before the moment when gravity noticed her. That's the closest I can get to what it felt like, kissing Vivian in the snow.

I get home, and Vivian is lounging on the sofa. "Hey," she says, and stands to give me a kiss on the cheek. I hold her tightly, feeling her whole length lean on me. When I pull away, she's smiling. "How was your day?" she asks, without waiting for an answer, and tells me Frank was over, with an amusing new book somebody somewhere must have thrown into a fire. She tells me the plot, but I just watch her mouth moving and listen to the cadences of her voice going up and down. After awhile she puts her arms around me again, and I touch her mouth and hips with my mouth and hips, and eventually it is morning and time to go.

The sun can be seen dimly through the clouds. The boat is made entirely of wood, of pine and oak and maple and chestnut. I've

patched the *Elysium* so many times, it can hardly be called the same boat.

When I help Vivian down into it, she is already looking towards the far shores of the Styx, the green meadows that seem to be made of clouds. She sits at the far end, where I can't touch her. I help the other passengers on board, and start rowing. I bail after each wave has crested, and resist the stiff head wind. The water level creeps up over our ankles, though nobody seems to notice. I catch a few crabs as I row us back on course, my muscles standing out from my shoulders, and swear a little.

On the other side, she melts into the crowd and is gone. I'm alone with the boat, the bottom of which is shining with the thousands of coins left on the eyelids of the newly dead. Some of them make little rainbows on the stern. Vivian had better currency than that: the way laughter burst out of her, her ridiculous anecdotes, her perfect profile.

Before I head back, I dump the day's wages into the river. I don't know what the gods were thinking. It's not like I can spend the damn things. •

Somewhere in Oregon

Gary L. Pierluigi

We are fuel for the light,
shaking trembling bits of feeling.

Odd these creatures that walk fearless,
inhale radioactive and shrug at all the work
to be done. We are fuel for the afterlife.
A muddled flushing stillness this slow
winding river. Naked and shaved clean
the cliff rocks rising without design.

Silence that is maddening, threatening.
The thought of polished bone, flutes,
and little white pills. Neil Armstrong
stepping on to the powdery surface
of the moon.

Three army helicopters appear, hover above
the rock cliff, rising like UFOs. Angry cold

metal that repeats endlessly. It is comforting, this sudden confusion, this drugged bitterness, this alien landscape. I am fearless, numb, surprised at my fascination. Naked and shaved clean the slow motion strokes of the blades.

We are fuel for all that we call mind.
We wake in blinkered nights our faculties
misplaced. Burned in the ether.

In this world the boy had at least a roof
over his head, some food, a little kindness.
In this world balloons filled with gasoline
rained down on his little soul.

Suffer the little child, his terror worse than the
killing blades rising into dense fog. Suffer the
lonely man child, the cracked, dry leaves applauding. •

The trick was gonna be
roughing her up without
doing any real damage.

Hollywood Roadkill

Cat Sparks

We were lucky to find her. Lu was dirty but she wasn't sick. Skinny but not malnourished, a rarity since the new lanes got added and fresh produce became a half-remembered dream. As if living Roadside wasn't already tough enough.

I'd been looking for someone like Lu for a long time. She needed training, or course; who didn't, but if my team pooled its resources I figured we could get her cleaned up enough to have a real shot at success. Shira had the legals covered, Derek still had memories of med school and Jase? Jase was muscle. When we got across, I'd take care of the press. We could have done with a style consultant, but style was a little thin on the asphalt this side of the Road. No, we didn't need style, we were going to play the kidnapped waif card—provided the codes I'd bought were good. That was why I needed Derek. Lu was going to have to get hit. It had to look messy or else we'd never get our sixty seconds, let alone our hour in court. The trick was gonna be roughing her up without doing any real damage. No marks on her face—just a little blood and a few scratches for sympathy. Maybe crack a couple of ribs for effect. There were tricks to bouncing off a hood and rolling out of harm's way. Derek was training her up for it. He'd gotten girls across the Road before, he said.

Lovely Lu: Tallulah as I had re-badged her, was gonna be our ticket out of here. Our job was to get her across the Road. Hers would be to get me through the city gates. The others too, if they could keep up. There'd be casualties. We weren't all gonna make it. It didn't do to care too much. Getting too attached to your running mates could be fatal.

• • •

It's Friday night and I find myself staring across the faceless grey expanse of Road, past the fires and occasional gunfire of the median strip and up into the brilliant outpouring of neon, laser, crystal and chrome that makes up Hollywood City. I think maybe I was born there amidst the shiny turrets and spires. I have memories of manicured lawns and children laughing. Children dressed identically in little plaid-print uniforms. Children with neatly-combed hair and plump, ruddy cheeks. Not the scrawny vagabonds that slink across the darkness here, squeezing between the tarpaulins and shacks, fighting each other in the mud for scraps of garbage. Roadside, if you're still a child at eight years old you might as well be dead, especially if you're slow on your feet, too weak to scavenge or too ugly to sell yourself. Most of us Roadsiders grew up somewhere else and backwashed here on a tide of filth. Hollywood city rubbish barges hover overhead, pausing to dump waste on us from the sky.

But me, I'm from Hollywood City. I just know it's the truth and one day I'm going back there, straight across the Road. Tomorrow is that day.

Tallulah's asleep now, drowsy from the extra food. The rest of us are buzzing on meth. Just enough to mask the hunger and keep us on the wire. There's no lights at all this side of the Road. Nothing to tell you what's coming or going but the whine of servos and the rumble and growl of engines. Jase says he can feel the big wheels trembling through the asphalt. I believe him. Jase doesn't talk much but when he does, its always about stuff he can feel. He's big, Jase, big and solid, despite the relentless gnawing hunger. Reckon he was built that way, although he's got the same chip extraction scar as the rest of us. When his skin gets cut, he bleeds, but he heals up fast. I wonder what he was, and what he did to wind up Roadside.

And Lu—I wonder about her too because she hasn't got the chip scar on the top of her neck. No scar, yet she can't have been born here. She looks too damn good for that. No, she's from somewhere else—beyond the spires of Hollywood city perhaps. Makes me wonder what else there might be out there. Maybe tomorrow I'll find out.

• • •

Derek says it's time. I expect Shira to argue, but she just nods and stares across the Road to the city lights, all neon rainbow-jewelled and winking coyly at us as if to say: *Come and get it baby—its all yours!*

Shira knows she was a lawyer in the way-back-when. She didn't lose everything when she lost her chip. Stuff you learned yourself before they chip you, you get to keep all that. Some city folks still raise their kids the old fashioned way. I would too now, if I had kids, knowing what I know. I've watched too many Roadside wash-ups tumble out of the garbage chute with shit in their pants, incapable of speech because their folks all chipped their babies instead of teaching.

I go to wake Tallulah. Her face is framed with soft brown curls. I wish I could leave her sleeping peaceful as an angel but it's time to do it—and if we don't go now we never will. Jase says this is the quietest time. Fewer road trains and overlands. Less chance of getting hit. Automatic trucks run on sonar rails. They don't need light for sight like we do.

We've told no one we're going but a small crowd has gathered. No one strong enough to mount a challenge or try and steal Tallulah for themselves.

This kid's standing a few feet away with his scabby mouth hanging wide open. Like he can't believe that we're gonna make a run for it. I look away. Part of me doesn't believe it either—or want to remember the set of circumstances that brought me to this point. And there's another part of me; deep down and dark, trying to force its way to the surface. The part that wants me to throw myself under the first set of metre-wide treadlinks that comes hurling at us from out of the black. Half the folks at Roadside check out that way, eventually. So much quicker than starvation or disease. No shame in it either. The Roadside folks always make the sign, pretend like the runner was trying to make the median strip at least. No shame in it at all, but me—I take another

snort of meth and focus on those gleaming neon spires.

Tallulah's eyes glisten with crystal-meth tears. Jase stands by the asphalt listening, his head cocked to one side. I take a final look over my shoulder at the slum I've called my home. The shack I built from scrap metal with my own bare hands. The shack I traded for a batch of numbers. If the 'Roach has ripped me off I'll be running all the way back here just to punch retribution into his face. Which one of us is more desperate? I'm betting that it's me.

I clasp Tallulah's hand in my own, smile at her as reassuringly as I can manage, and then suddenly Derek says, "Run for it," and so the five of us run.

I think I hear a cheer go up behind us, but I can't be sure. Might be the wind in my ears or the palpitations of my heart, but it sounds like cheering, and there we are, all five of us running forward into the night. Striding with purpose, because we have some place to go.

Minutes in, we hear the thundering screech of a road train in the blackness up ahead. Jase stops and so we all stop, still and nervous like rabbits. We can't see it but we feel the blast of hot air as it hurtles en route to its programmed destination.

I grip Tallulah's hand tighter, trying to reassure her that we know what we're doing. Trying to remind myself what I am doing here. The Road is cut deep into the earth. Too deep to see the city lights. We can see each other bathed in the tepid yellow haze of the torchpins clipped to our belts. We're taking a risk with that. The 'pins make us easy targets. But somehow I doubt the trucks and trains are programmed to scout for runners. What are we to them but roadkill? Bigger than rabbits, smaller than bears—and even rogue bears are too small to mess up the front of those titanium bullbars.

Jase gives the word and then we're running again. Faster this time, by some unspoken consensus. We can hear vehicles on either side of us now, but Jase keeps on running and so we do too. I need more meth but I'm not stopping for it. Nothing's gonna stop me till we reach the median strip.

Looking at the outline of Jase's broad back in the smudge of available light, I realise something I should have guessed before. He's military issue, plain as day. More machine than human, whether he bleeds like us or not. I wonder why he got discarded, what he did to piss them off, but then suddenly my ears are filled with the screech of

metal. The acrid stink of chemistry. I don't know what it was that missed us, but it was damn close. I felt the heat of its engines on my cheek as it hurtled past into the night. Tallulah stumbles. She can tell how close we came to getting splattered. I grip her hand tighter. Too tight, I know, and I pull her forward towards the bobbing firefly glows of the others' pin lights. She's barely keeping up, and I think she's crying. Maybe she's too buzzed to get the tears out properly, or maybe she just doesn't want me to know.

Fires burn up ahead on the median strip. We're so close. I get excited, relax my grip on Tallulah's hand, then give it a little squeeze. She squeezes back. She's still with me. She still believes we can do this thing. We don't run straight toward the fires—I drilled the other four on this before we left, but I didn't tell them why. We veer to the right and run alongside the median strip wall for a kilometre. I let go of Tallulah's hand and push her in front of me. We're safe from traffic in single file so long as we stick to the wall.

I'm thinking about the foil of meth in my pocket when suddenly Jase stops. He uncoils the line from across his back, steps out onto the road and starts to swing the grappling claw around and around. When it gathers enough momentum, he lets it fly. We wait, straining our ears for traffic sounds, nervous at how far out on the dark road Jase is standing. The claw clatters against rock and falls. Jase reels it in and tries again. This time it catches. He tugs twice to make sure it'll hold, then moves towards the protection of the wall.

Jase goes up first, then Derek. I send Tallulah up next, then Shira, then me.

The wall is a pastiche of cement and brick work, easy enough to climb once I'm off the ground.

They're all crouched waiting for me at the top, but I don't see them. All I see is Hollywood City blazing like a nebula. I have to blink, my eyes water from the overload. So close. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I want it, more than anything. It was my home, I know it was, and it'll be my home again.

Hollywood light pollution means we can find our way along the median strip. It also means that others can see us—and there are others here. Renegades like us, outward bound, half a road away from liberty.

Tallulah sinks to her knees and I realise its time to eat. Crossing

the Road burned up all our calories. Derek shares out what we have. It isn't much, and once again we give Tallulah most of it. Nobody complains. She's our ticket to freedom. Without her we're homeless now as well as helpless.

A few mouthfuls of food make us all feel a whole lot better. Shira hands me her canteen and we share the last few sips of dirty water. We watch as Derek takes Tallulah to one side and runs her through her routine again.

"My name is Tallulah. I was kidnapped from my apartment," she recites with a trembling voice.

"Blink now, widen your eyes. Innocent and hurt," he says, "that's it... that's the *sense* we're going for... the *vibe*..."

"You've got to help me. My parents don't know where I am. It was Ganglanders took me. I saw their leader's face. I think I've seen him on TV..."

"Good, Lu darlin', that's very good," says Derek. "Don't give up on the blinking now. Gotta keep those wide brown eyes clean and clear. We need them to believe you."

I fix my eyes on Tallulah's silhouette, cool black against the blazing lights of Hollywood. So beautiful, both of them—the city and the girl.

"You know she's gonna have to get hit," whispers Shira. "And even if she doesn't, once inside the city, you'll never see her again."

"I'm not in love," I tell her—and I mean it. There's no place left in my heart for love after six years Roadside. And there's something else I don't tell Shira. This is not my first attempt to cross the Road. I've run before—twice, and I've got scars to show for both times, inside and out. I don't tell the others. I don't want them to know how bad our chances really are.

But this time is different because this time I've got a plan. A *modus operandi* and a slim strip of numbers in my wristband that means they've got to open the gate. Got to check out Tallulah's story, no matter how bogus it sounds. Got to patch her up after her accident and pay off her "friends". Once the media drones have fixed on her, even half a chance'll be enough.

I snort another pinch of meth and offer some to Shira. Its dirty stuff but it bucks me up like a punch in the face. My precious city blurs for a moment till I wipe away the tears with the back of my hand.

"We're moving out," I say and the others scramble to their feet and prep for action.

I haven't told them about the spiders—or whatever those multi-limbed things are that patrol the median strip walls. No point in freaking out my team. They know to run from anything that moves. If we're trapped by one of those things, running won't make any difference.

The median strip is maybe half a K wide, thicker in places, thinner in others. The surface is uneven so we have to watch our feet. There's nothing grows on the 'strip at all—no regular garbage deposits like we get back Roadside. Nothing to eat except rats and runners.

Jase goes ahead scouting for fissures. A deep one could lead us straight to the far side of the 'strip and to an easy climb down onto the Road. I keep Tallulah in my sights but she's moving as well as the rest of us. Derek must have dusted her up.

We run in silence, breathing deep and slow. Hoping we're far enough away from the fire to pass unnoticed. But I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched. There's no evidence of anything. Just a sensation in my gut. The ones that live on the median strip, they're barely human any more. Caught between the coming and the going, living and dying. Ran out across the road, too terrified to make it back. Or there's those who got thrown back from the city gates. Maybe that's what the spiders are for—to keep the runners in, not out.

I'm sure we're being watched, but we run on regardless. Jase leads us to a section of far wall where the cement is ragged and torn. Rusted metal beams protrude like ribs. Easy enough to climb down without the grappling claws.

Only ten lanes remain between us and Hollywood City. A shudder of exhilaration wracks my body. This is the farthest I've ever made it. First time, I never even made it up the side of the 'strip. Second time... I trace my index finger down the length of the burn scar on my thigh. I don't want to remember. This time is the only one that matters. This time I'm going all the way.

Derek goes down first, followed by Shira, who grips Lu tightly by the elbow to make sure she doesn't fall. I'm about to follow when I hear a noise behind me. Something that sounds like metal sliding through soft flesh. I turn in time to see Jase fall, a sharpened spike protruding from his chest. Blood pours from the wound. Jase's mouth opens. His eyes widen and I know that he's taking in the bright lights

of Hollywood City with his dying sight. Something yanks him backwards. I don't wait to find out what. All I do is pray he's really dead as I scramble down the jagged concrete fissure for my life.

At the bottom, the others see that Jase is not behind me. They don't ask. All of us turn our faces to the Road and make the sign. We all know the risks, and it's not over yet. There'll be time for grieving on the other side.

This stretch of Road will be easier than the first because this time we have light. Ten lanes illuminated by Hollywood City lights.

We move in single file parallel to the wall, trying to gain a bit of distance from the place where we lost our Jase. We know we have to run soon, just in case whatever took him's still hungry.

Seems like there's more traffic here than on the other side, but maybe that's just because we can see it. Road trains: massive tanks of chromium and grey, barrelling through the night, stopping for no one. Mixed among them, occasional ancient rattlers of rust and grime, ploughing forwards at maximum throttle until the day they shake themselves to pieces and can run no more.

I've got that feeling of being watched again. The traffic flow increases every hour closer to dawn. Its now or never.

"Run!" I shout to the others. And we run.

Derek and Shira have Lu between them. It was supposed to have been Derek and Jase, but Shira knows what has to be done.

Soon comes the hardest part of all. We'll take our lovely Tallulah and bounce her off the hood of an oncoming car. Something small—a private vehicle. Once we have a drone recording, she'll say her spiel and blink her big brown eyes. The drone will suck up the pieces of code I'll feed it—code for persons on the official "missing" list. Unnamed, uncertain, yet we'll have to be checked out. They'll open the barrier field for missing persons, especially one whose blood-stained face has been broadcast citywide. Whoever's car she bounces off is going to want the problem fixed. They're gonna want us inside the city, far away from freelance TV eyes.

There's nobody guarding the city gates. No need for human guards since the barrier field went up.

I spy the burnt-out shell of a vehicle. My heart lurches. If there's been a smash here recently then no one's gonna give a fuck about our Lu. But when I step closer, I realise the wreck is old, it's interior thick

with damp moss. Things must be very different here. Back Roadside, the moss would have been eaten long ago.

Derek's briefing Lu again. I can see that she's terrified beneath the mask of meth. I scan the skies for drones—wouldn't do to get ourselves recorded before we're set.

We're just about ready to do it when Shira speaks my name. We're not alone. There's a figure watching us from the shadow's edge. I think it's a man, but when he steps forward into the light I can't be certain.

Man or not, he wears articulated armour hammered from scrap steel, decorated with blood and bones. He stinks of oil and rust and war, even from ten paces off. Bone Man is not alone, but his companions skulk in the shadows waiting for his word.

Shira and Derek shove Lu between them as they draw their knives and prepare to fight for her life. We are no match for these urban warriors crouching beneath the city gate. They will kill us for our meat, throw our bones and gristle to the traffic stream. Hell knows what they'll do to Tallulah. If it comes to that I'll kill her myself.

Precious moments trickle past. As my eyes adjust to the arrhythmic pulsing and flickering of the city lights, I count the figures shrouded in the darkness. More than a match for us. We are dead. And yet the slaughter does not begin. Why is this?

"So," the person of blood and bone before me says at last, "How youse planning to get inside?"

I won't tell him. I may have to die, but I don't have to die for him.

"You got a plan," the figure states. "Them that makes it this far always do."

Suddenly there's a high-pitched squeal. Above us a media drone slingshots into view. I can hear the whirr and chitter of its servos, the steady hum of its all-weather 'tronics. I don't look up. Neither does Bone Man. He unholsters his weapon, aims above my head and fires before I have time to flinch. Tiny flecks of burning metal score my cheek as the drone disintegrates.

"I'm betting you got gate codes," says Bone Man. "Give them over and I maybe let you go."

Go where, I think, wishing to hell I had a gun in place of the pathetic blade taped to my ankle.

We can't standoff here forever, I'm thinking. Any moment there'll

be another drone, or worse.

"The codes are in his wristband," says a gentle voice. My heart breaks.

"Nice work Lu," said Bone Man. In one swift movement his tribe surrounds us. Lu pats us down for ordnance. I expect her to avoid eye contact, but when its my turn she stares straight at me, eyes as cold as glass.

"Strip off your clothes," she says. "All of you."

As I shed my filthy rags, I realise the thing that's killing me most is that I don't remember anything good about my life. All I know in detail is six years Roadside and some vaguely coloured, half-remembered images from childhood. Little plaid uniforms and soft green grass. Laughter fades, and that's it.

Now I'm naked save for the sickly neon shine coming off the gate. Shira's weeping. Of all of us, she was the one who stood the best chance. Derek's face betrays no emotion. I think he died a long time ago. But me, I was living, kicking and screaming for a chance right up until this final moment.

They're going to have to hack my wristband. I'm not telling them anything. A gust of wind brushes my face, a stray current belched from a passing rig. In a second I'm up and running towards the Road, running as fast as my legs can carry me. All I see is the dazzle of oncoming headlights—the blazing fires of evermore. Time slows, tires screech and darkness pulls me tight into its breast. •

She held the vial up to the light. It was bright, clear violet, indicating it was a happy memory, and very vivid.

Perfect Violet

Will McIntosh

As soon as she returned from selling the memory, Kiko opened her journal and read the last entry:

When you were sixteen, you met a young man named Joseph Errat at the cinema. He was sitting behind you with a friend. He was a black man, tall and lanky. He had four neck-rings, and fiery red face-paint around his eyes. He kept leaning over and talking to you, and you were scared, and you gave one-word answers to discourage his questions. But he persisted, and finally you turned and looked at his face, and you saw such kindness there that when he asked you for your number you gave it to him. You went on a date, the first date of your life, and Joseph was funny, and bright, and looked into your eyes the whole time. He took you to dinner at The Blue Albatross, then to Low-Grav Skate. He showed you how to skate high up the walls, putting his arm around your waist to steady you, and his touch felt electric. At the end of the date he walked you to your door, kissed you once, softly, and asked to see you again. You said yes. Then he asked if he could see you a thousand more times, and you laughed, and said yes, and kissed him again and ran inside.

Kiko read the memory four times, then closed the worn notebook and put it back on the coffee table, straightening its edge so that it was parallel with the edge of the table. She took most of the money she'd made selling the memory, put it in an envelope, and slid it under her landlord's scuffed green door. Safe for another week.

The end of the story of her romance with Joseph was still intact, because that part was flat and brown, so it had no value. To have it removed she'd have to pay, and she could not afford to. Plus, she wanted to keep as many memories as she could. Good or bad, all were her life.

Her father had seen Joseph kiss her at the door, and he'd forbidden Kiko from seeing Joseph again. When Joseph called and Kiko told him what her father had decided, Joseph had called her father a racist. She had defended her father; she knew he disapproved of Joseph because of the neck rings and face-paint, not his skin color. But in the end they were shouting at each other, and they never spoke again.

Kiko sat back in her chair, exhausted. She wrapped herself in her checkered blanket, not because she was cold, but for comfort, and looked at her photos—hundreds of colored squares perfectly spaced floor-to-ceiling on one chipped and bruised wall. There was her father, standing proudly next to her at her high school graduation. There Kiko, holding her puppy, Rumor, the day her father brought Rumor home as a birthday surprise.

She had no photos of Joseph—you don't bring a camera on a first date. If only their argument had taken place in person, she would at least have a memory of his face. Now, she had nothing, except the entry in her journal and the memory of Joseph's voice.

Kiko retrieved the weathered black cord snaking out of the apartment's antiquated Net-Jack, plugged the spiral of faded gold prongs into the neural shunt at the base of her skull. She did a search on Joseph Errat. There wasn't much. He worked on the west side of Lower Manhattan, writing code for an industrial construction firm. No information on marital status, children, parents. No photos.

She counted the money that was left, then put it inside her Zen book. That had been her last memory with any real value. The next time she needed money she'd be forced to sell bargain memories in bulk. Her past was already checkered with flat, static patches; she did not want to sell any more of it.

Laughter drifted through the open window. She went over and looked out. Below her, children played in the shadowed street with a stick and a heavily taped ball. A chipped half-toilet served as home plate. Judging by the reflected light it was a sunny day. From her fifth-story apartment she could not see the sky. You had to be up at least twelve stories for that. Above her, all she could see was the underside of Upper Manhattan, a grey ceiling stretching past the tops of the crumbling buildings of Lower Manhattan in all directions. To her left, one of the tremendous pillars that supported Upper Manhattan shot upward like a stone giant, flaring at the top into huge white fingers that cupped Upper Manhattan's carbon fiber foundation. Kiko closed her eyes and pictured the dazzling glass spires, aflame with reflected sunlight, that comprised Upper Manhattan. She had never actually been up there, because she could not afford the toll. Her memory of Upper Manhattan was the only memory she'd ever bought.

• • •

"Kiko! This order's been here for five or six minutes! Pick up! Pick up!" Mrs. Kim hissed, scowling fiercely.

"Yes, ma'am." Kiko's heart hammered. She scooped up the brown bag behind her, called "number eighty-seven," dropped the order on the counter, returned to the line of customers waiting to order.

She absently wiped her free hand on her pant leg, trying to get rid of the feel of grease from between her fingers, as she took the next customer's order. She glanced at the industrial clock on the concrete wall—forty more minutes and she would get a three-minute bathroom break and could wash her hands.

The customer sat down to wait for his order, and the next customer in line stepped up.

"Hello Kiko," the customer, a tall black man, said.

"Yes," she answered, hesitantly.

"Don't you remember me?"

"I'm sorry, I don't." she glanced nervously in the direction of Mrs. Kim, who was standing on a stool, digging for something in the back of a storage shelf.

"Well, isn't that an ego-burner!" He said, grinning. "It's Joseph... we went out once, eight or nine years ago?"

Kiko's mouth fell open; she covered it with her hand and looked at the man in front of her. He was a handsome man, wiry, his jaw prominent. Kind eyes. No neck ring or face-paint. His hair was braided over his shoulders and nearly down to his waist. She glanced toward the back; Mrs. Kim was climbing down.

"I'm sorry, I can't talk now. It's very nice to see you again, Joseph." She smiled nervously. Then, realizing he had not come in to see her, she added, "May I take your order?"

He ordered bean kung pao. As he stepped away from the counter, he said, "Can I talk to you when you get off work?"

"I get off at 2 a.m."

"I'll see you then," he said.

• • •

Joseph was waiting outside, leaning against a grey metal street lamp. He straightened up when he saw her, held out his hand to shake. "You haven't changed at all," he said.

"Neither have you," she said. "Except no neck rings and face paint."

Joseph laughed, put his hand over his eyes for a moment. "Yeah, I fancied myself quite the rebel." He sighed. There was an awkward silence; Kiko searched for something to say to fill it, but nothing came.

"I'm curious," Joseph said, finally. "Why did you run a search on me after all this time?"

"How do you know that?" Kiko asked, horribly embarrassed. Of course he would be able to set alarms to alert him for searches; he wrote computer code for a living. How stupid of her.

Joseph shrugged. He looked at her, not unkindly, waiting for an answer to his question.

Kiko looked at the cracked pavement. "I sold the memory of our date, and I was hoping to find a picture of you to help me reconstruct it."

"Oh," he said. "Well, that solves the mystery, doesn't it?" Six or seven scowling teens passed them. Kiko took a step closer to Joseph, who nodded to a gangly, pimply boy with a steel antenna skewering his skull. The boy grudgingly nodded back.

"I didn't do it out of choice," Kiko said into the silence after they

had passed. "I needed the money."

Joseph nodded. "I understand. Times are tough." He shook his head. "I read there's half a million people living in the tunnels underground," he said.

Kiko nodded. A siren trilled in the distance. She was not sure what else to say. "I have to get home, it's late."

"Do you still live with your father?" Joseph asked. Kiko's stomach twisted.

"No, he died three years ago."

"I'm really sorry," Joseph said. His eyes said he meant it, maybe in a number of different ways. "I'll walk you, if you don't mind the company."

They walked the half-block in silence, their footsteps echoing off the buildings. Kiko looked up at the dark ceiling, wishing there were stars overhead.

"Can I call you?" Joseph asked when they reached her door.

She gave him her number, smiling like an idiot.

Inside, she scrubbed the stink of greasy food from her hands, then went to bed. When she finally fell asleep, she had a nightmare, that Joseph's appearance after nine years was only a memory she had bought.

• • •

Joseph stood in her doorway holding a tiny package wrapped in glowing paper. "Hi," he said. "This is for you."

She smiled hugely, unwrapped the beautiful paper a fold at a time without tearing it. Her smile dropped when she took out the memory vial. He had bought her someone else's memory, probably some hack memory-artist diving off the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge for the hundredth time, with no memory of the previous ninety-nine because he had sold them all to some memory-mill. Worst of all, once she installed it her mind would slowly incorporate it, make it her own. The hairy-knuckled hands from the original diver would become her soft, hairless hands. Over time she would not know for sure if she had bought the memory or jumped off the bridge herself. Memories were slippery. They drifted. Kiko wanted nothing to do with other people's memories.

"Oh," she fumbled, "that's very thoughtful of you." She carried it to her table and put it down next to her journal, then grabbed her jacket and headed for the door.

"Don't you want to see what it is?"

She hesitated, unsure of what to say. After a few false starts, she said "It's very nice of you to bring me a gift, but I don't care for other people's memories. There was no way you could have known that. I'm sorry to be ungracious."

Joseph smiled. "Come on, trust me!" He held his hands out in supplication. "Tell you what, if you don't like it I'll pay to have it removed."

Reluctantly, Kiko retrieved the memory. It would be terribly rude to refuse the gift twice; she really had no choice.

"Look at the color," Joseph said. She held the vial up to the light. It was bright, clear violet, indicating it was a happy memory, and very vivid. The numbers etched on one end of the vial would indicate the exact valence, vividness, and size of the memory, but Kiko did not care to look. She thought the way people fussed over the tone and purity of memories just made the whole thing more sordid, but she pasted a false smile on her face and acted as if she were impressed.

She centered the flat end of the vial on her neural shunt and pressed. A moment of disorientation, then in her mind's eye she saw a younger version of herself sitting in a movie theater; laughing in a restaurant; skating unsteadily up a wall; parting her lips slightly to be kissed at the door of her father's house. Along with the visual memory, Kiko was shocked by the charge of emotion that rushed into her. She felt Joseph's thrill at being with her, his hope that she liked him, the butterflies he felt when she smiled. Through his eyes, she was so beautiful. It was overwhelming to feel it all firsthand, having the truth of Joseph's very own memory. She was seeing into Joseph's soul, and what she saw was that he had loved her.

She threw her arms around him and burst into tears. Each time she tried to talk, to tell Joseph that it was the most wonderful gift she had ever gotten, better even than her puppy, Rumor, nothing came out but sobs.

"Tell me all about our date," he whispered. "I want to remember it."

• • •

Kiko thought of the time she had played with her cousin in the park, who had been visiting from Philadelphia. "Describe" was flashing on the screen in front of her. "My cousin visits, and we play hidden-disk in the park on a beautiful summer day," she whispered, not wanting others in the boutique to overhear. The screen now flashed: "Isolate." She held the memory in her mind, and pressed the yellow "retrieve" button on the console. A gentle hum, and the memory was gone. She glanced down at the notebook in her lap to see what the memory had been.

A vial popped through a round hole above the console and slid down the wire ramp until it bumped up against the last in a long line of vials. Kiko leaned over to check the color of the vial. Red.

She closed her eyes, scanned for more happy memories. *Think*, Kiko chided herself, *there must be more*. A woman was talking noisily with the boutique's owner, and it cut right through the walls of the booth and made it hard for Kiko to concentrate. *Good memories. Think*. She realized she should have made up a list before she came. She'd never sold memories in bulk before, so it hadn't occurred to her.

She scanned the forty vials already lined up. Only two were labeled in the violet range, and both were murky, indicating they were pallid. They must have been old memories, worn out like old photos. She checked her notes, which she would transfer to her memory journal when she got home—yes, one was her first day of school, the other feeding ducks by hand in Central Park. The rest of the vials had tested at various hues of red, except for one that was not even red, but light brown. She consulted her notes. That was a time she and her father had gone to the museum together. Brown hues were hard to sell, unless they were very dark, very vivid. Sick memories for thrill seekers. She would take this one home and reinstall it.

Think. The problem was, she did not remember much of her early childhood. For the most part her memories began when she was nine or ten. She knew from reading that all her memories were there—memories never disappeared once they formed, they only got lost, or were sold. Her early memories must be terribly lost. *Early childhood*, Kiko thought, closing her eyes. *Picture your room, what games did you play? What was on the walls?*

An image of a hammer flashed in her mind, one end hooked with long steel fangs. *I'm going to...* What was it? The memory skated just out

of reach. She tried to dig it out, though the knot in her stomach told her it would not be one she could sell. Still, it was her life, and she wanted to know.

The memory popped loose and washed over her in a sickening wave. She had done something wrong—gotten in trouble at school, that was it. When she came home her father was sitting in the kitchen, dabbing sweat from his face with a white handkerchief. He had stood, opened a drawer, and taken out a thick butcher knife, saying, with icy calm in his voice, “I’m going to kill you, then I’m going to kill myself.” She had run to her room and locked the door. He had pounded on the door with his fists. Then silence, and she’d thought it was over. Then, a deafening bang that made her cry out, followed by another, and another. He had pounded on the door with the flat end of a hammer, then turned it and hit it with the claw end until the wood split with an awful crunch. The knife was gone. Instead, he had beaten her with a wire hanger ripped from her closet.

She’d been wrong, she probably could sell that memory. But she would not allow some twisted pervert to get pleasure from it.

With shaking hands Kiko disconnected the feed from her neural shunt, collected the vials, and put them in the basket provided by the boutique. These would have to do. She had no good memories left, except for the new ones with Joseph, and she would never sell those. The rest of her good memories were gone.

“Do you have any marriages?” the loud woman was saying as Kiko made her way through neatly-lined shelves of vials categorized into sections—action, family, adults only, crime, and so on. Bargain-bin stuff. The valuable ones were displayed behind the counter—row upon row of dazzling violet, except for a few at the top as brown as raw sewage.

“No marriages, no,” the owner said to the woman, who wore a white hat that came to a point beyond her forehead like a ship’s prow. She was in her fifties, tall and puffy. Her clothes screamed Upper Manhattan. Down here to devour the few joys people were able to eke out, like an enormous hog.

“How about a divorce?” the owner suggested. “I’ve got a real shocker, a woman who’s husband drops it on her like a bomb!”

The woman scowled. “I’m not interested in that sort of thing. That’s sick.”

"Okay," the owner said, shrugging. He turned to look at his stock. "How about an engagement?" he said, retrieving a vial from the wall, "valence of 90.1, vividness 68.6? Not bad. Hard to find engagements, harder than weddings even."

"Hmm. Call up the description." The owner popped the vial into the reader, spun it around so the woman could read the text of the original owner's description. The woman nodded. "I'll take it, along with those other two."

The owner rang them up. Kiko was astonished by the price—enough to pay her rent for two years. The markup was enormous. She wondered if it was really true what they said, that memories could be extracted and transferred, but not copied, that no one could isolate the spark that gave them life in the mind. Maybe the truth was that they were simply more valuable if they were unique.

The boutique owner tallied Kiko's memories, commenting that it was 'pretty good stuff,' clearly all original-owner memories judging by the clarity scores.

Outside, she saw the woman, smiling widely, her eyes unfocused. She muttered something in a girlish voice, then giggled, put her hand on her cheek. "Yes, yes," she trilled excitedly, and headed off down the street, in the direction of the lift to Upper Manhattan.

Exhausted, Kiko headed home. Her rent was five days late. Mrs. Kim had not paid her in three weeks, saying things were bad, but would get better soon. Kiko was afraid Mrs. Kim was not going to pay her any more, was just getting as much free work out of her as she could.

Maybe it was time to move in with Joseph. It was foolish of her to keep refusing his offer, but she didn't think it would be good for their relationship to start living together after dating for only six weeks.

But that wasn't it, she realized. Her father would have disowned her if she lived with someone before marriage, and she didn't want to defy her father, even in death. She loved him too much.

When her key did not turn the ancient dead-bolt on her apartment door, she jiggled it, tried turning it again, and again, until an impression of the edge of the key blazed red on the inside of her finger.

She heard a voice inside her apartment, then another, speaking Spanish. She was being robbed! A jolt of fear pounded her and she

twisted the key with all her might. The lock did not turn. Desperate, she pounded the door.

A short man with a mustache opened it. Over his shoulder she saw a woman, and a room full of unfamiliar furnishings. Realization came, finally. "You live here now?" she said. The man nodded. Kiko turned and ran down the hall, knocked on her landlord's door. The edges of her vision went black as she waited, and she saw the pitted door through a porthole. The landlord did not answer. She pounded again, then leaned against the wall across from the door and sank to the floor.

An hour later her landlord arrived and told her matter-of-factly that he had evicted her because her rent was always late.

"Where are all my possessions?" she cried. The landlord jerked his head toward the back door, then went into his apartment without another word. Kiko raced down the hall and hurled open the door, which led to a filthy, narrow alley where the trash was collected. She spotted two legs of her chair jutting out of a green dumpster. A low mewl escaped her clenched throat as she looked inside. There, her copy of *Immediately Zen*, the cover bent back and torn halfway off. There, her toothbrush. In the corner, pressed against the filthy wall of the dumpster, her checkered blanket. Strewn everywhere, her photos. The photo of Kiko holding her running trophy in eighth grade and a dozen others lay under a lump of congealing chicken lo mein. Where was her memory journal? Kiko climbed into the dumpster and clawed through brown bags of food, tissues, newspaper, as flies buzzed around her head. The stink inside the dumpster was intolerable. Her journal was nowhere. Gasping, panic rising in her throat, Kiko shoveled handfuls of trash out of the dumpster.

She spotted the faded red cover near the bottom and howled in relief, clutching the stained book to her breast. When her head stopped spinning, she started collecting her photos.

• • •

Joseph was not at home. Kiko propped the three trash bags of possessions next to his door, wiped her nose with the back of her filthy hand, and sat to wait for him.

He had not returned by dark. They had planned to see each other

at six. Joseph had never been late when they had plans, and she started to worry. She left her bags by the door and headed toward the plant where he worked.

She almost walked right by him. He was sitting inside the landing of an abandoned tenement halfway to the plant, his head hung low, resting in the crook of his elbow.

“Joseph?” Kiko called. He did not lift his head, but as she stepped closer she was sure it was him. “Joseph?” She squatted on the step next to him and put her arm across his shoulders. Startled, he looked up. There was a deep, bloody gash at his hairline. Kiko cried out in alarm.

“Joseph? Is that me? Do you know me?” he said. She wrapped her arms around Joseph’s head and held him. “Please help me,” Joseph said into Kiko’s shoulder.

“What happened?” Kiko whispered.

“I don’t know. I remember being blindfolded. They led me up a staircase into the street, pushed me into a car, then dumped me here. I don’t remember *anything* before that. *Nothing*.” Joseph started to tremble. “Oh God, I think they wiped me!” He sobbed.

“Don’t worry, I know who you are,” Kiko said. “I’ll help you.” Kiko held him until he stopped crying, then took him to the hospital. She used the money from her memories to pay the bill. Then she took him to his apartment and helped him onto the couch. She sat on the floor beside him. She was filthy, desperate to shower, but reluctant to leave him.

“This is intolerable,” Joseph said. He closed his eyes, let out a hitching breath. “I’ve lost my whole life. I don’t even know who I am.”

“Your name is Joseph,” Kiko said softly. “You were born here, in Lower Manhattan. Your parents are dead. They died in the class riots of ‘34—”

“I know about the class riots. I know about Upper Manhattan, I know poor people are kept out of it... how can I remember all this if I can’t remember my own name?”

Kiko rubbed his knee. “That’s procedural memory—abstract things you learn, like how to get toothpaste out of a tube. A memory wipe takes out episodic memory, your memory of the events in your life. They’re separate.”

Joseph nodded. “There’s something else, though.” He paused for a moment, thinking. “I don’t remember you. But... I know I care about

you."

Kiko smiled. "I think some memories go beyond the mind—they sink into the bones. They figured out how to remove memories from the brain, but I don't think that gets all of it."

Kiko told Joseph everything she knew about him, told him his friends would be able to fill in even more. Then she stood. "I have to take a shower. I don't know if you've noticed, but I stink."

Joseph managed a halfhearted laugh. "I didn't want to say anything."

"I was in a dumpster a few hours ago. Once I've told you who I am, I'll explain what happened to me today."

Wearing a t-shirt she'd found in Joseph's bedroom, her long black hair still wet, Kiko returned to the living room, pulled a photo from one of the trash bags, and tacked it in the bottom right corner of a big, blank wall in Joseph's living room. Only she knew it was also her living room now. "This is me with my cousin Ike, in Central Park," she said. Joseph sat up, elbows on knees, and looked at the picture. She put up another just to the left of the first. "This is me with my puppy, Rumor."

"He's cute," Joseph said. He seemed eager to absorb any information he could. "From those paws, I bet he grew up to be a big dog."

Kiko paused, looked at the ceiling, thinking. "You know, I don't remember."

"Maybe you sold all your memories of when he was grown up?"

Kiko shook her head, still staring off, trying to recall. "I would have written it down." Finally she shrugged, pulled another photo. "This is my father. He died three years ago." What should she tell Joseph about her father? "He was a complicated man, but he loved me."

• • •

Kiko and Joseph wove a detour around a scrawny woman with no front teeth and a blank-faced child, encamped in a field of debris. Ragged pieces of wallboard were propped to delineate a boundary. The woman held out her hand halfheartedly as they passed.

"If we find any of your memories, how do we get them back? We don't have money to buy them," Kiko said.

"Could we call the police?" Joseph asked.

"Or maybe the president," Kiko said.

Joseph shook his head. "Yeah, I guess not. Let's just see if we can find them first."

A woman came out of the memory boutique up ahead. She started across the street, then noticed Kiko and Joseph and changed direction, heading toward them. She was staring at Joseph. An older woman, well-dressed. Kiko recognized her.

"Do I know her?" Joseph said under his breath as the woman approached.

"I've seen her before. In the boutique. She was buying expensive memories."

The woman had a huge smile on her face. "Joseph?"

Joseph smile politely. "I'm not sure, I'm sorry...where do I know you from?"

Suddenly the smile vanished. The woman turned red. "I'm sorry, I mistook you for someone," she said, turning on chrome heels and hurrying away.

Kiko and Joseph looked at each other, perplexed.

Kiko inhaled sharply. "She buys memories! I bet she has one of you!"

"Wait! Hold on!" Joseph called. The woman picked up her pace; Joseph went after her with Kiko right behind.

"Please, hold on a minute," he said when he caught up, grasping her elbow.

She whipped around, yanked Joseph's hand off her. "Stay away from me!" she cried, fishing something from a chain around her neck. It was a bodyguard remote. She activated it. The bodyguard leapt from her purse, a flash of metal teeth and blades, the size of a rat. It raced up Joseph's leg and wrapped itself around his neck, a razor-edged limb poised an inch from his jugular. Joseph froze.

"Stop it!" Kiko screamed. "What's the matter with you?"

"What do you want?" The woman said.

"We just want to know what memory you have of Joseph. We wouldn't hurt you," Kiko said.

The woman took a few steps backward, then called off the bodyguard. It climbed down Joseph and crouched on the ground in front of the woman. "It's none of your business, I bought it legally," she said.

"I understand that," Joseph said. "But I had all of my memory

stolen; I just want to know if you have anything that might help me piece together some of my past.”

The woman considered for a moment. “All right, I don’t see the harm. I went on a date with you, to dinner, and roller skating.”

“That was me,” Kiko said sharply.

Joseph spoke over her. “Would you sell me that memory? It would mean a lot to me.”

The woman shook her head brusquely. “I don’t sell memories.” Not that it would have mattered if she did, Kiko thought. Joseph clearly had no idea how much high-quality memories cost.

“How many do you have?” Kiko asked conversationally.

The woman smiled. “It’s my hobby. I’ve had twelve weddings, I’ve been proposed to seventeen times...” She seemed to relax as she talked about her memory collection. Kiko let her talk.

“Have you ever been married yourself?” Kiko asked.

“Let me see.” the woman frowned. “Yes, I have. To a musician—a tall man with long blonde hair. I met him while waiting tables at a bar in Little Italy...”

Kiko listened patiently to the disjointed description of someone else’s love story. When she was finished, Kiko said “Would you consider trading for the date with Joseph?”

The woman raised one eyebrow. “What have you got?”

“I’m opening a gift, a surprise. It’s the best moment of my life. The memory is perfect violet—I guarantee the valence and clarity will both be over 95.”

“If they are, you’ve got a deal,” the woman said. She tried to sound nonchalant, but her eagerness bled through.

“You pay the extraction fees?” Kiko said. The woman nodded agreement. She put the bodyguard away.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Joseph said as they walked three paces in front of the woman.

Kiko smiled easily. “Yes,” she said.

In the booth, Kiko made sure to think only about opening the gift, and her joy when she realized what it was. She did not want to accidentally activate the memory that Joseph had given her and have that extracted as well. After pressing “retrieve,” she read over the account of the memory she had written on a scrap of paper, to be added to her memory journal. She retrieved the vial: valence 99.3,

clarity 98.9. It would be worth a great deal if she sold it. Numbers that high interested collectors who displayed memories on shelves rather than inserting them and allowing them to drift and contaminate.

Outside the shop they exchanged vials, the woman smirking as she read the stats. Kiko handed the first-date vial to Joseph without looking at the stats. She knew the numbers would be much lower than when she had first sold it, but it didn't matter. "My gift to you," she said.

Joseph's eyes filled with tears. He took the vial from her.

"Well, nice doing business with you," the woman said.

"Yes," Kiko said. "May I say something?" she added as the woman turned to go. The woman shrugged. "Whatever it was that happened to you, it will still be there, no matter how you try to paper over it with other people's happy memories."

"Nothing bad happened to me," the woman said, irritated.

"You had it taken out, but it's still in your bones." The woman waved her hand at Kiko and walked away. At least Kiko had tried.

When they got home, Joseph inserted the memory. He smiled for the first time since the attack. Then he hugged Kiko fiercely, his muscles bunching against her shoulders.

"Why didn't we stay together? What happened?" He said. "I must have done something to hurt you." He pulled back from her and looked her in the eyes. "If I did, tell me so I can say I'm sorry."

Kiko shook her head. "It was my father..." She pictured her father, scowling that night after their date. Should she tell Joseph the truth? She saw her father lying in the hospital, coughing blood. She should let his memory rest in peace. On balance, he had been a good man.

The butcher knife popped into her mind, the sound of the hammer pounding on her bedroom door. She flinched, closed her eyes.

"Kiko, are you all right?" Joseph said.

She nodded slowly, her eyes still closed. "He was a good man. He took good care of me."

She saw the bedroom door; the pounding was deafening. The door splintered as the teeth of the hammer bit through it. She heard father, screaming that he was going to kill her.

Then the door burst open.

Instead of her father brandishing a wire hanger, a fury of brown memories came at her through the open door: beatings with cables

and fists, days spent scrubbing floors and walls and toilets; meals eaten in terrified silence, her father never looking up from his bowl. Hateful things her father had said to her. And Rumor. Why did she have no memories of Rumor, except as a puppy? She saw Rumor in her cousin's arms in the back seat of a car, pulling away from the curb. His puppy now. Rumor had not been given a second chance to pee on father's clean floor.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Joseph was rocking her. She was crying, her eyes so full of tears that the room was nothing but streaks of light and color.

Through her tears, Kiko told Joseph about her father. Everything. He listened, and he cried, and their tears mingled as he pressed his face to hers.

They lost track of time, and Joseph was almost late leaving for his first day back at work. After he left, Kiko took all of her pictures off the wall. She stacked them neatly, along with her memory journal, in the back of a drawer. •

They are digging their way out,
it is a history-making break. So
each day she checks the crib
bottom for holes.

The Baby Blues

Julia Campbell-Such

It's a crib-full. They are squirming, their tiny cries like mouse-peeps. They shake their tiny purple fists at her, their faces still crushed from the weight of her pelvis. Faces squeezed out like icing. They are nine angry steel workers from New Jersey, wrapped in swaddling cloth, yellow still in the throes of their birthday jaundice. Angry steel workers on strike. Demanding things. And she's Management.

She tries to suckle them but their mouths are too small to take the nipple and they choke and cough and spit up white liquid that dribbles and drips on her. She's supposed to use a syringe instead. She fills it up from a breast pump that pulls at her breast, distorting it and making sucking sounds that turn her stomach.

She calls them all "Babe" after Babe Ruth, because there are nine of them, like a baseball team, and they are all cranky and always spitting.

"My Bambinos" she says, hoping for the flutter of love to ripple through her chest.

There are several different explanations for why she gave birth to so many babies. Some involve genetics, age, race, or God. But deep down everyone knows it was the drug.

They call the drug Surgonal, which sounds scientific, but she read the list of ingredients and she knows that in fact it is made from the

urine of post-menopausal women. It is witch-pe. Pure magic. A puff of smoke, and abracadabra they pull a soft white rabbit from your barren uterus. Since then she has had nightmares about giving birth to animals. Cats, pigs, a budgerigar.

But back then, hope was a fluorescent light, a machine that beeped and blipped, soothing music in a clinic waiting room. Hope was a lump in her stomach that grew and rumbled, until one day it kicked her from inside, and multiplied into nine.

They had kept the needles in a picnic-basket with a bottle of wine. They took it to the beach, sat on a blanket and watched the lake waves roll in. The lake was so big it never froze. Driftwood washed up on it. Bruno had rolled up her sleeve and injected the drug into her, the jet of it spreading warm through her muscle. Nine days of this, and nine months waiting, and now the nine tiny human products were squirming and rioting between the crib bars. Ready to take over. And she's government and talks with the rebels are breaking down.

"My little Bambinos" she says.

A little rash where the needle went in.

She catches a fruit-fly in her palm and crushes it against the window, wiping its guts down the glass. There are dishes from six days ago piled in the sink, a jungle of mould in the fridge.

"I'm making penicillin," she says this out loud, but no-one else is around.

She can still feel where three times three babies used to rumble next to her stomach, where they stretched the placenta like a slingshot and then rocketed out of her like so much buckshot. She feels like a chamber emptied. Thrown back by the recoil. A big hole in her gut where it all spilled out.

Two days later she starts sewing. She's making baby-clothes. They are in black-and-white stripe because the babies look like little prisoners in their crib-cage, and also it is the NY Yankees uniform.

She has ironed a serial number on the back of each outfit: 9, 18, 27 and so on until 81. "This is cute," she says, "it is adorable." Bruno takes this as a good sign.

She invents them criminal records. 45 is in for robbing liquor stores. He plays first base. 72 is left-field, crack dealer, heavy-hitter. 9 is the pitcher, ERA 2.7, grand theft auto. They are a team. A conspiracy. They talk in hand-signals, in winks and taps on the sleeve.

She sits by them, guarding them, sleeping with her feet propped up on the picnic-basket, which is still full of used needles and wine stains.

She is dreaming about her wedding. It is crawling with people, hundreds of them. Their shoes leave little dents and holes behind them on the lawn. Poplar trees drop seeds and fluff that floats in the air and never seems to land.

"The caterers are late," Bruno tells her while she is still getting dressed.

"Fuck." A vein throbs in her forehead. She is covered in lace that spreads over her back and itches in the heat.

Bruno's voice is dry. He has hundreds of little red bumps on his cheeks from shaving.

"I told you..."

Her mother smiles through a creme-de-menthe, like she knows what is coming.

She wakes up sweating to the smell of diapers and rotten milk. Outside is cold snow on black branches, a net of branches against the white sky. The dishes are still in the sink, Everests of porcelain.

"Unscalable," she says. "I'm no Sherpa." She says this out loud, but no-one else is around to hear her.

Centipedes run in the dust, ants wait in the cabinet corners. An eggshell is lying on the kitchen floor near the garbage can. There are babies everywhere. A critical mass. Her skin tingles at the thought of it: so much life crammed in.

The little things are always growing. Bigger every day. The little fists meatier, the eyes beadier, the cheeks pinker. Healthier. Stronger. Meaner.

All this hard jail time does is turn them into better criminals.

In the hospital they had been amateurs. Sick for the first week, respirators rammed down their throats, they had played for sympathy. Bruno had taken a Polaroid of it, babies swimming around her in the hospital sheets, all tangled in a web of IV tubes. But even then they had seemed suspicious somehow, with their veins showing through translucent skin.

Now, they plan their escape in whispers she can hear at night mixed up in Bruno's breathing. They are digging their way out, it is a history-making break. So each day she checks the crib bottom for

holes. She has them in lockdown, and they're crying about it. Whining about it. It's a prison riot in the making and she's the Warden. The catcher, number 36, spits up on his pillow.

She doesn't sleep nights, and Bruno starts to worry.

"Maybe you should..." he says this often.

"They're too small"

"Go out someplace..."

"I need to stay and watch them. They'll run away." He laughs, he thinks she's joking.

She shrugs and smiles. "One day they will learn how to crawl."

They are already learning other things. Pinch-runner number 45, for one, has been stealing more than bases. The other day a paring knife went missing from the kitchen. She found it under his blanket, and he screamed when she took it away. 72 has been selling her sleeping pills to the others in exchange for cigarettes. She knows from the smoke on his breath when she goes to feed him. And 9, the ace, he's building the getaway car out of the gears in a Fisher-Price jack-in-the-box.

Every time she walks by they bang on the bars of the crib, clang clang clang, and stare. When she feeds them they suck on the syringe sullenly, and half the time they spit it back up on her shoulder in disgust. Number 18 is growing his hair in a Mohawk that won't smooth down no matter how hard she tries, and 27 has a mark on his back she is sure is the beginning of a tattoo.

Eventually, inevitably, it all comes to a head. Number 9 starts it off. He's crying. A low, tearless wail. She tries to comfort him, but he won't stop. One by one the others join in. It's too organized not to be planned in advance. It gets louder. It goes on for days, maybe weeks. They take it in shifts, so there's no break in the noise. It is a battle-cry. It lodges itself in her gut and resonates through her body; it rises in pitch until she swears all the glass in the house shatters.

"Okay," she says, finally, quietly, head in her hands, "you're free to go."

The driveway is lined with drifts of snow, cold as hospital walls. She has her warmest coat on. There is a woman coming up the sidewalk, waving, smiling.

"Cold out." Her name is Diane.

"Cold out."

"Where you headed?" Diane is in a leather suit, her hair smoothed back. Clean.

"Lake. Maybe, I mean... just a walk."

"Well, we haven't seen you in ages and..."

"Tired. I mean, I've been pretty tired. All those babies..."

"I guess!"

"You guess right."

Diane fidgets, flipping her keys around her left thumb. "So, uh, how are they?"

"Who?"

"Well, the babies..."

"Oh. There's nine of them. They're very small."

"Uh-huh..."

"They... well, you know... there's nine of them and only one of me," she laughs. They both laugh.

"I'm outnumbered," they keep laughing. There is a silence.

"Are you taking a picnic?" Diane asks her because she is carrying her picnic basket.

"No, uh... just some stuff."

"You must be so happy."

"What?"

"After all that work... nine!"

"Nine! Yes, nine."

"It must be a record."

"Yes, it is. A record. Must be."

"You should call someone about it."

"Yes, I should."

Diane smiles and her lipstick cracks in the cold. There is a little movement inside the picnic basket.

"Well. I should go."

A rustling, a kick.

"Yeah, see you soon."

"See you soon."

She walks away, leaving Diane in the cold driveway, waving.

Bruno walks home from the hospital, which is unusual, but he needs the air. He goes down to the beach that edges on the lake. The lake that is so big it never freezes, even in this cold. He tries to avoid too much thinking. He sees something on the beach; the waves are

lapping at it. It looks like the picnic basket they have at home. He thinks about picking it up, but he doesn't, he leaves it there and walks by. Behind him the basket tips gently into the waves and floats out onto the water.

She is already back at home. She has only been gone for twenty minutes. She looks around, she sighs. It is finally quiet, and she is all alone.

"My Bambinos." She says this out loud. •

It seems he has left certain matters unfinished. Loose ends, so to speak. Several of them, in fact.

Quiet Empire

Michael Vance

Glass clinked softly as Barlowe filled two cups with port, then set the bottle aside on the cabinet. A fire glowed behind Drake, warming the small study, and Barlowe crossed briefly in front of the window before seating himself opposite the other man. Picking up his pipe, he drew thoughtfully on it, then exhaled smoke toward the ceiling. Neither man spoke of events on the moor. A sharp wind whipped against the window, making Barlowe glad for the fire, and he stared into the contents of his glass for many minutes before drinking.

"I was visited by Landers' solicitors today," Drake said at last. His face was drawn, his eyes shot through with red. Already a slender man, he had... diminished... this past month, Barlowe thought.

"Damn the solicitors," Barlowe replied, cocking an eyebrow in Drake's general direction. "Damn all solicitors. I hope you threw them out. What did they want?"

"To speak to me of Landers' affairs. His business affairs, that is. It seems he has left certain matters unfinished. Loose ends, so to speak. Several of them, in fact. His man went on at some length." Drake shook his head darkly, then drank. His hand shook slightly, and one ruby red droplet of port fell to his sleeve, but he did not notice. "We are related through my wife's family, and it seems I am mentioned in

certain of his papers." Drake did not appear pleased by this. "They thought I might be able to help them." He gave Barlowe a significant glance from the corner of his eye.

"Of course they did," Barlowe said amenably, nodding his head. How someone could imagine Drake capable of helping anyone... "Naturally. Perhaps we should wait on Mallory before discussing this?" He pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it, then looked sharply toward the window. What was keeping Mallory? Already the man was more than an hour late. Drake seemed to catch his reaction.

"We was not looking well, when I saw him last," Drake said, sinking back in his chair until it seemed to swallow him. "He has set up an encampment, east of town. He may not show, I'm afraid."

May not show? Barlowe squinted hard at the other man, his pulse picking up. He thought of Mallory out on the moor alone....

A *thump* overhead cut short his next words, and he sat back hard, his heart hammering in his chest. Barlowe craned his head back, the hairs along the back of his neck suddenly standing. "What—?" he began.

"The wind," Drake said, his voice a whisper floating out of the great chair. "Something blown loose. We will need to go down to Portsmouth Street tomorrow—" He trailed off, watching Barlowe. His eyes seemed buried within his skull. His lips were thin and bloodless. "I would not go up there, man..." Again he let his words trail into silence.

Wiping sudden sweat from his brow, Barlowe stood. He almost never used the third floor now. Some of the rooms had sat for years with the doors shut, the dust and the silence thick on them now. *I am in my own house*, he thought. Perhaps Drake was right.

"Stay here if you wish," Barlowe said. "I will return shortly."

A log chose that moment to shift in the fireplace, sending a small streamer of sparks scattering across the grate. Without waiting on Drake, Barlowe grabbed a candle and mounted the stairs. Not a sound was heard above now, though he could still hear the wind whipping at the window of the study behind him. *Courage, man.*

One of the doors along the long hallway stood open, and Barlowe eyed it for a long moment before moving. The air was biting up here, the cold almost as sharp as it was outside, and he could see his breath misting in front of his face as he stopped before the open door.

His wife was in the room—one of the spare bedrooms. She was folding clothes on the bed. At first she seemed not to notice him standing

in the doorway, and he watched her. She was so methodical, so careful... Silently she turned and carried some of the clothes to a dresser and placed them away, still not looking at him. Then she saw him there and shot him a hard look. She had never approved of Drake, had never approved of pipes and bottles of port and long conversations that went on into the early hours of the morning. "Jenny," he said at last. His chest was knotted so tight he could hardly breathe. "Oh, Jenny."

• • •

"Damnable thing." St. Ames drew on his pipe and squinted, straining to see by the weak light of a single lantern. Hawking stood off to one side, rigid as ever and watching silently. And behind him, Brendon Drake stood in the shadows, almost entirely invisible there in the gloom. Not that St. Ames wanted any sort of clear look at the man. "It smells, too. And not pleasant, eh?" Reaching into his pocket he withdrew a handkerchief and held it over his face.

"It has eaten through the wall there," Hawking said, pointing. He may as well have been discussing what he would have for breakfast. "And in other places. There was some in the cellar, but the ice has taken it since. I am not certain the structure here is still sound."

They were standing in Hawking's attic, staring at a patch of... fungus, or moss, or... something that seemed to consume the light of the lantern and had spread across the ceiling and a good portion of the wall as well. But one thing stood out for St. Ames.

"It's alive." The statement brought a nod from Hawking, and even Drake shifted in the dark, his shadow rolling briefly against the wall before stilling itself. "That in itself sounds almost miraculous to me, when not even a simple houseplant is able to cling to—"

"Alive?" It was Drake. St. Ames turned, hoisting the lantern. At first Drake shied away, but then he came closer, so that the crags of his bony face stood out horribly in the flickering glow. "What kind of plant grows in the dark, St. Ames? Eh? You see it yourself, and Hawking just said it: the thing is consuming the wall there, and the roof over our heads as we stand here." Involuntarily St. Ames shivered and raised the lantern toward the ceiling. Even Hawking frowned slightly, a rare show for him.

"And that smell." Drake inhaled theatrically through his long, beaklike nose, and grimaced. "It reminds me of the grave, and

nothing less. Don't tell me you don't sense the same. The smell of rot, of death and decay, the start of the horrible march toward entropy." He paused to regard the other two men, cocking his head in a way that reminded St. Ames of a crow. "Burn it."

"Burn it?" St. Ames said sharply, coughing and then yanking the pipe from between his teeth. "Are you mad, man?" Almost immediately he regretted his words. Drake had been a good man, once. A different fellow than he was today. If he had declined since then, well...

"I hardly think it would be wise to burn my own house down," Hawking said dryly, eyeing Drake from the corner of his eye, his arms behind his back. Even here, he was the picture of a gentleman, and St. Ames felt his heart warming at the sight. "I had hoped Barlowe would be here to take a look. Perhaps another time."

St. Ames nodded fervent agreement. "Another time," he replied. "Barlowe would have come, old man, but this thing with his wife... It has shaken him. I saw him this morning and he looked—"

"Like a man who's seen a ghost?" Drake cocked an eyebrow, then scowled darkly. "Don't frown at me so, man. He *did* see a ghost, and I saw her too, as plain as we are standing here. Believe what you will. She was as solid as the floor beneath our feet." He glanced at the strange fungus hanging all around them. "Perhaps a shade more so, in fact, now that I think on that. Fitting. This whole world has gone to smash." He finished darkly.

"Let's make our way to the inn," St. Ames said, feeling suddenly exhausted. "Barlowe will be waiting there by now, if this latest incident has not shaken him too thoroughly. And perhaps Mallory will show, as well."

"Not Mallory," Drake said. "We have seen the last of him, I am thinking. And perhaps of Barlowe as well, though I hope that I am wrong there. He's a solid sort, is Barlowe. It may be that it takes a little more than the ghost of his dead wife to rattle that man."

Hawking seemed to regard Drake very carefully for a long moment, during which St. Ames hardly dared breathe. "Let's be on our way," Hawking said at last, heading toward the stairs. "And be mindful of the third step down. It is not entirely solid."

• • •

St. Ames peered in through the darkened window of the

haberdasher's shop on Portsmorrough Street, feeling morose. The glass was cold against his cheek, and his breath misted in front of his face, obscuring his view. From behind him, he heard snow crunching beneath a booted foot.

"He's closed up," St. Ames announced pointlessly, turning to face the other two. "Pickens is gone, and no doubt of it, though most of his things are still inside. He was making me a hat." He turned slightly, catching his reflection in the shop window and grimacing. He looked almost as ragged and unkempt as Drake, these days, and the thought was almost as chilly as the wind.

"Someone will have a key," Drake announced, bouncing back and forth on his toes in an effort to keep warm. "A landlord, or such. We'll find someone, tell them you've paid Pickens for his work, and you'll get your hat."

"I *haven't* paid Pickens for his work," St. Ames replied. "I was to pay him for it today, and now he has gone, hasn't he?"

"So he has, like most everyone else in this town." Drake spat viciously into the snow, his eyes alight. "Smash the window, I say. A brick would do the job well enough. The hat will be somewhere inside. And I could use some new gloves while we're about it. A new coat, as well. I'm thinking Pickens won't mind."

St. Ames stared at him, aghast. Hawking shook his head, gazing off down the street as if he had heard nothing. His voice was tired when he spoke. "Doubtless they would not notice a brick through a window. Who is there left to notice such a thing, after all? And it has already happened elsewhere, if not in this neighborhood. But we will do no such thing, will we? Whatever has happened to Pickens, we are civilized men and not criminals, eh, Drake? What do you say?"

A cold wind gusted down the street, blasting them with snow and tiny, glittering diamonds of ice. Though it was just past noon, the sky overhead was dull and grey, and Portsmorrough Street was dark and silent. The three of them were the only ones out, and St. Ames was certain that they would pass other empty shops as they walked today. Hard-packed snow made the walking difficult. Moments ago, Drake had remarked on the lack of footprints to be seen here.

"Merely an idea." Drake retreated a step, evidently eager to be on his way. "We are civilized men indeed, Hawking. Civilized men to the very end, eh?" He cackled, then subsided abruptly. When St. Ames

turned from the shop and resumed his march through the snow, the other two fell in silently.

From somewhere, came the distant sound of a train's whistle. Hawking, walking slightly alone to one side, stopped very sharply and listened. The whistle faded, and St. Ames found himself hoping that the lonely sound would not come again, but it did. The second blast sounded slightly closer than the first, though it was hard to say for certain, and Hawking drew a small notebook and a pencil from his coat. With his other hand he produced his pocket watch, and then scratched furiously in the notebook. "Again," he whispered, and the train whistle sounded a third time, the sound already distant and fading into the air. Hawking frowned, jotted something else, then put his notebook away.

"Where does it stop, I wonder," St. Ames said. "I have asked, and no one seems to know. There must be people on it. People and food. And it has to go somewhere. Perhaps somewhere that this damnable winter has not taken everything."

"It's a ghost train." Drake, ever the cheerful one, seemed eager to be on his way again, but he waited on Hawking, who still had not moved. "There *is* no train, St. Ames. The sirens lure good men to their deaths—isn't that how the old stories would have it? A ghost train, piloted by ghosts. It *should* stop here, though. God knows, we have no shortage of ghosts looking after passage somewhere."

"It always comes from the north now." Hawking strode forward again. "It used to come from every direction, but now it is always north of us. Whatever has happened, the world has started to settle. Some predictability has returned."

"It must be bloody cold north of here," St. Ames remarked miserably.

"In the world we used to know, the polar region was north," Hawking replied. "But look around, and tell me you see some trace of the world we used to know. Who knows what might lie to the north, now?"

In grim silence again, they walked.

Soon the sign for the Eaglescliffe Inn came into view ahead of them, and even from down the street they could see the rich orange glow coming from its broad front window. As one, they quickened their pace. St. Ames swallowed hard as he imagined a plate of potatoes and roast beef and a mug of good, dark ale set before him. The world, it seemed, had not come entirely apart after all. A carriage moved

down the street ahead, drawn by a handsome bay, and some fool had parked a bicycle against the side of the inn. Hawking chuckled softly at the sight, and Drake cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Ever an oasis, lads," Hawking said quietly, a small smile on his lips. "Our final stronghold—the enemy has not taken it yet, it seems." St. Ames chuckled appreciatively and clapped the other man on the back. Even Drake allowed himself a smile untouched by his usual bitterness.

Their good humour slipped when they entered the inn, however. Five or six other patrons occupied tables, well under half what they might have expected to see. No food lay in sight. And the fire—St. Ames did a double-take—was a sick, flickering thing. St. Ames felt a rush of relief when he spotted old Barlowe in his usual chair, an enormous mug of beer in front of him and a tired smile on his lips. Barlowe hoisted the mug when he spotted them, and waved them over with his other hand.

"I had half-expected you not to show," St. Ames announced, too loudly, as they took their seats. From the corner of his eye he caught Hawking's reproving look and he rushed on, trying to cover. "That is to say, you have a long walk, longer than the three of us—"

"And I rather think I put some doubts into him," Drake cut in. "I wondered if you might not disappear on us. Like Mallory. Like half the people in this town." Drake gazed at Barlowe with some affection. "But you have not, of course, and St. Ames is glad to see you. As am I."

Barlowe bowed his head briefly in thanks.

"As are we all," Hawking said smoothly, arranging himself carefully at the table. "But I feel something amiss, even here—"

Whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the innkeeper, Robb Bonder, at their table. Bonder, formerly a jovial, fat man, moved with a heavy step, and his skin seemed to sag on him today, giving him a ghastly expression. St. Ames felt himself drawing back in his chair as Bonder braced himself against their table. The innkeepers eyes were grave as they passed over the four men, and he shook his head distractedly. "She is gone," he announced, without preamble. "My old Maud has gone." He blubbered ridiculously for a moment, then gathered himself. "Gentlemen, I forget myself. You are hungry of course, and though I am not the cook that my Maud was, I must remember my duty. I will bring tea, and mugs of ale, and soup to start. And then..." As if the air had been let out of

him, he slumped into a chair.

"You would break your teeth out on the bread," Barlowe said in a quiet voice, watching the innkeeper, who seemed not to hear. "And the meat is green. One of these others tried the soup and found something... unfortunate in it." Barlowe shook his head. "Slowly we are running out of food. We are running out of many things. I fear that soon the snow will bury this town, and all the people still in it. The great fields of ice will creep down and cover us. We will be entombed here, and it may be that excavators in some future age will find us, sipping our brandy and wearing our top hats like exhibits in a museum, all frozen solid. And that is if this age of men has not ended entirely. I have discovered, only this morning, where Mallory has disappeared to, along with so many of these others..."

• • •

Logan Hawking gazed down at sheets of calculations, numbers spilling into numbers, all flooding across his great wooden desk. How many hours had he spent studying them, now? Too many to count, certainly. He knew them by heart, could recite them in his sleep. He knew for a certainty when the lonesome train whistle would blow again, and when it would blow after that, on and on for months and maybe years into the future. But still he hesitated. It was fear that held him. He knew that, as certainly as he recognized his own face in the mirror. He was crowded in by fear these days, trapped like an animal, and it was time to act.

A bottle of ruby port sat open beside him; his pipe smoked gently in his left hand, filling the study with an aromatic haze. All the familiar things of his life were gathered around him in this small room. On the floor was a case filled with items he thought he would need when he left Eaglescliffe: instruments of navigation, maps, charts, copies of the calculations which covered his desk. A pistol.

Something Barlowe had said earlier played inside Hawking's head: something about this being the end of the age of men. It was an idea Hawking had considered many times these past months—these past years. He realized with some unease that he could no longer remember a time when it had not been winter. Sometimes he would dream of a place like this, but a place where the grass was green, where it was

summer, where people worried about things other than their daily survival. That was a real place, he was sure. He had lived there as a boy. But that place had changed, and was never coming back. Icy tundra covered the land now for miles around, and strange herds of wild beasts roamed the frozen plains. Beasts that had vanished from the earth millions of years ago. This current ice age had brought them back. None of it could be fathomed, and Hawking had decided it was better not to try. It would drive a man mad eventually.

He knew only that it was time to leave. There would be others out there, somewhere. The great cities must still be standing. All of civilization could not have vanished yet.

Like a ghost, Hawking drifted through the study. Lovingly, he touched a brass telescope, and regretted he could not take it with him. His books lined the walls, austere and dark, and he sighed as he brushed past them. All the learning of the ages, arranged by alphabet. A large, dusty brown globe sat in the corner and he grinned ironically as he gazed down on it. The reddish continents, the green oceans—who knew how out of date they all were, now? And the compass that told north from south, which now held no such certainty for him...

They were leaving in the morning, the four of them, and any others who cared to go. Some would stay, he knew, and become the frozen curiosities Barlowe had predicted over beer today. Others would join Mallory, out on the plain, and who knew where they might go? Perhaps their bones too, would be dug up in some distant age, stone axes close at hand, alongside the remains of slain mastodon and strange beasts of burden, their jewellery fashioned out of the teeth of giant cave bears and sabre-cats.

His clothes were laid out for morning: his hat, the boots freshly shined, his walking stick hanging from the arm of his chair. Order was necessary in all things. He was a gentleman. If ever some distant generation found his bones, they would know that much about him.

Hawking set about organizing his papers, stacking them in drawers, so that the place would be neat when he left in the morning.

• • •

Outside of Eaglescliffe, the tundra was packed hard as stone underfoot. An icy wind blasted out of the east, and Hawking watched

Drake's coat flapping about him like a flag. Barlowe, who had insisted on dragging an enormous trunk along, slipped and fell, flopping on his belly like a fish before St. Ames came to rescue him. Others had come along, a dozen or so, hauling their precious things with them. For the past hour no one had spoken as they tramped along, and no one had turned to look back.

His fingers numbed by the cold, Hawking withdrew his pocket watch and checked the time. The train whistle would sound in the next few minutes, ahead and to the north. He hoped they might find Mallory and his band, first. There was still time.

They topped a small rise, and through blowing snow they saw crude tents laid out below. Dozens of them, all made out of dead trees and animal skins. There were fires, too, and people moving about, some of them covered in animal skins. Heads turned, arms were raised as people pointed, and Mallory appeared out of nowhere. His hair was a mess, and his beard too, Hawking noted. He was using some sort of animal pelt as a scarf, it seemed, and he held a stone-tipped spear.

Hawking thought briefly of the pistol in his pocket, which was loaded and ready to fire, then stepped forward with his hands at his sides. Mallory stood squarely between Hawking and the camp below, watching.

Shouting over the wind, Hawking told the other man about the train, and where he thought it might carry them. He explained about his calculations and his charts, and told Mallory that almost no one was left in Eaglescliffe now.

"Come with us, man. Bring these others, gather their things and hurry. They will follow you."

Mallory crunched the end of his spear into the snow. "Bring your people to the camp," he said, gesturing over his shoulder. "We are moving on ourselves—heeded east. I've gathered all who want to come, and I can wait no longer. There are herds coming up from the south, and we must follow them when they come. They are what will feed us now; your days of agriculture and milk cows and chickens in the yard are over. Come with us!" The last was a shout, directed at the group standing at Hawking's back. "You! Drake! You will join me, at least."

Hawking turned. Mallory was clearly mad, and it came as no surprise that he had singled Drake out of the group.

"You will never last, Mallory," came Drake's shouted reply. He stepped forward dramatically, one arm raised high and pointing. "These herds will outrun you, and you will be lost out here. The wolves will squabble over your bones. Come with us, and we will sit by a fire and drink good brandy again, like civilized men."

Mallory chuckled, his eyes coming to life. "North, is it? There is nothing to the north of here but what you see." He gestured in a wide circle with one outstretched arm. "Miles and miles of empty plains. Of absolutely nothing. You'll be eating bits of grass, like cattle! Go far enough, and you'll find ocean. But no train tracks, I am thinking, and certainly no train." He finished in a shout, again. Behind him, in his camp, dogs began to bark, and people shouted to quiet them.

And the train whistled. It came from the north, and silenced the barking dogs. Silenced Mallory, and Hawking and Drake. Mallory, standing there in his rags, cocked his head at the lonely, desolate sound, and seemed about to speak. But when the whistle came again he stopped. Something struggled behind his weirdly glowing eyes, and Hawking imagined he saw a memory of some other time there. Words had not got through to the man, but the train whistle might. It did sound closer out here, though they had not yet traveled far from Eaglescliffe. The third blast of the whistle would do it... and if not, they would go. Hawking had no intention of approaching the camp.

But the third blast was weak and fading, as it always was, and as it vanished into the wind Mallory took a step back, seeming to smell the air. Then he looked at Hawking, and simply shook his head.

"Crazy bloody fool," Drake muttered as Hawking rejoined the others.

"Bear up, old man," St. Ames said to Barlowe, as old Barlowe slipped again in the cold snow. Hawking paused briefly to help him up.

"Two days walking," Hawking announced, in a raised voice. "A week at most. If we can hear the train whistle, the train is close. We have supplies enough to get us there."

Determined, he set out walking again, with an even stride. Behind him, St. Ames bent to pick up the dragging end of Barlowe's great trunk, and Barlowe nodded gratefully. From somewhere south came the sound of distant thunder, and Hawking imagined some great herd of beasts raging across the ice, coming toward them, their eyes all aglow. The sky was heavy overhead, and the day was dark, and Hawking patted at his pocket, feeling for his pocket watch, and for his pistol. •

Revelation

Gary L. Pierluigi

It's coming.

It's coming from a hole punch warrior,
from the circuitry in rayon fields, from a love of tyranny
and disorder. It's coming colorfast, like fuses blowing,
like pre-coital chivalry. Oh yes. It is coming. You can't
hold it back, force it back into its envelope. It's coming,
and you'd better be prepared; if not cash in those savings bonds,
the RRSP's and enjoy your last bit of privacy.
It's coming from the center of your being, from a bellybutton
faltering on remote. Batten down the trailer parks, put chains
on the tires; check out the shelf life repositioning fear.

It's coming.

It's coming from the propertied classes,
from the fear in the streets,
from the loaves of bread in the bakery, from the no of a child
stomping mind signals; telepathy the absence of a room.
Veneer saturates, sedates, proffers control. A culture without
silence. Noise fulminates, punctuates, drills holes
in our eardrums.

Faces without chins, and of course, all those delinquencies.
Have you forgotten? It is still there. It is still coming with a
fury of need in resemblance to passive radicals, light as a breeze,
heavy as a sail. •

Michael wasn't so sure that
change was a good thing.

Living Under the Conditions

James Moran

As the early April sun made his cheeks flush, Michael didn't know what to believe in anymore.

The birds bitched in the trees as he crossed through the middle of the park, which smelled of mud, dry grass, and strong marijuana. Two men wearing shirts and ties sat on a nearby bench on the rectangular perimeter, eating take-out lunches in styrofoam boxes. A middle-aged blond man threw a Frisbee to his retriever in the centre of the park. Mid-morning traffic rushed by on all sides.

All this meant nothing to Michael, who glanced at his watch and sped up. The birds might vanish or change into other animals, the smells of spring might change to fall, the people might float away if the gravitational constant ended, and the speeding cars might suddenly have no traction.

He had spent enough time getting used to it but had never liked it. When Michael was growing up, he and other kids shared stories about where their parents were when the Wormhole Incident happened. Civilians didn't know the details even now, except that scientists had discovered a wormhole in space, not far from Earth. Various interstellar

agencies around the world had rushed in to study and capitalize on the discovery, but something had happened. One day, morning became night, and since then, things were always changing—time, eras, laws—the Conditions, as they called them. That was why Michael had checked the Weathering Change network before leaving the house, in case anything came up. The forecast had looked clear, but he knew they were rarely right.

But right now, he had only 15 minutes before his job interview and he was in a white-hot panic. That wasn't enough time to walk the eight blocks to the office, and there wasn't a bus around. Michael's heart pounded faster. Sweat covered his knit brow, palms, and already-sweaty armpits. A smell of aftershave and cologne rose from him like steam.

Michael glanced down at his freshly ironed black dress pants to make sure he had not stepped in a puddle. They looked fine. The growling engine of an approaching bus made him look up.

Michael bore down on the far corner of the park where the bus pulled up to pick up a half-dozen passengers. Maybe he had finally had a lucky break. He quickly joined the line, boarded, paid, and shuffled with the crowd toward the rear of the bus.

The bus pulled away, passing the beer store and parking lot across the street.

A billboard at the far end of the lot advertised a tall, frosty mug full of ale that threatened to spill voluptuous foam over the lip of the glass. The ad read “In these times of change, remember that change is a good thing. Try Reef's Crimson Ale.”

Michael wasn't so sure that change was a good thing. But he needed rent money badly and hadn't worked in a month. Now in his early 30s, the career crisis of finding a day job hit him each morning. This was his first interview call in months.

Michael jostled past a seated, overweight woman with a hairlip. Her dirty beige jogging pants had a stripe along each side. With her right foot, covered in a running shoe, she gently nudged a pudgy baby dressed in a red jumper and stuffed into a stroller. Michael narrowly avoided tripping over both of them. The woman coughed, her stale breath wafting up to him over the smells of sweat and soiled diapers.

Michael stumbled past a tall, black man with long dreadlocks listening to a yellow MP4 player. The man nodded and swayed his slim, muscular shoulders as Michael navigated to the back door and

grabbed a metal railing with his right hand.

“Excuse me,” someone said timidly behind him.

Michael tried to stay to the right side of the door. A short Chinese man in a beige bomber vest squeezed by, brushing Michael with his pot belly.

A pressure loosened in Michael’s ears as though he had just come down from a higher altitude. He shook his head, squinted his eyes shut and opened them again.

The Chinese man rose into the air, a look of wide-eyed wonder on his face, scuffing Michael in the chest with his right shoe and flailing his hand against Michael’s cheek. The man latched onto the railing. Michael felt his own feet rise from the floor.

“That’s just the gravitational constant,” the voice of the bus driver crackled on the PA system in a thick Francophone accent. “Hold onto a bar and keep moving towards the back. Keep moving towards the back, please.”

As if to affirm the news, many passengers floated upward. The man listening to his MP4 did not notice, his thick dreadlocks rising around him like an umbrella. A skinny teenaged boy snored in the back, leaning over a side seat with his arms crossed and his jaw slack, oblivious to the fact that he would soon thud against the ceiling with the small of his back. A brunette with her hair tied back jostled to the door, chatting on her silver cell phone, which slipped from her hand and rose above her head.

The baby at the front of the bus giggled. Michael spotted the boy in the jumper floating feet-first toward the bus driver above everyone’s heads. His mother yelped, clutched his foot and yanked him back.

The bus stopped. The doors sighed open.

Michael pushed the stranger out by his wet soles. A few more passengers floated after him, clearing the space by the doors.

Two tall, fat men in their 40s floated into Michael’s field of vision.

“I’m telling you, Ralph,” said the man with a round, plump face, and a head of white and brown hair, wagging an index finger at Ralph. “I cannot believe Foreman still has the heavyweight title. Oh! Excuse me.”

Michael and the man traded a curt nod as Michael pulled himself up to the doors, and then traded a “Thank you” and a “You’re welcome.”

“The fight was pathetic!” the man continued. “The challenger was

all over him the entire 12 rounds."

Ralph, even larger than his companion, with a head of red hair, hovered toward a young couple sitting across from Michael. He tapped the metal bars on the top of the bus seats to keep moving.

"Didn't he have the time problem?" asked Ralph.

The first man nodded. They hovered further toward the back, their baritone voices louder than the murmur of other conversations. "Halfway through the fight, it was the tenth round, then the ninth, then the eleventh. When they got back to round seven, Foreman looked rougher than ever. He's just too old. They should've tested him for time steroid use."

"I don't know," said Ralph, drifting toward the ceiling, much to the dismay of the seated passengers beneath him, who visibly stiffened at the sight of a 250-pound man hovering overhead. "He got the title for a reason."

The bus turned north up a main street and toward the downtown business district. Michael rang the bell clumsily using the string by the door. The bus stopped, the doors opened, and he floated out above the street, which was like a busy river in a canyon of tall, glassy office buildings. A mob of bus passengers boarded around him, a shadow passing across them.

Michael looked up.

A small sports car, a red Jetta, floated overhead, probably an older model without non-gravity adjusters. People who buy used cars that aren't safetied don't understand the gravity of the situation, he thought.

Michael held the edge of the roof of the bus shelter he had floated toward and shoved himself from there, at a height of eight feet from the sidewalk, from light post to light post down the street. Around him, other commuters floated and negotiated the air. A newspaper flapped by, briefly revealing a colour photo of an anemic blonde woman in a bikini, followed by a real-life French poodle with a bouffant hairdo and a tuft of tail. An elderly woman with a similar haircut did the front crawl behind the dog, yelling with each stroke. Michael thought it was like watching someone try to fly in a dream.

Michael passed her, reached a phone booth, grabbed a telephone post with both hands, and awkwardly pulled himself to the busy sidewalk. He was two feet from touching down when a cottony pressure

returned in his ears.

Michael plummeted to the ground, landing on his right leg and arm and his rear.

Around him, similar accidents occurred in a cacophony of sounds—impact, curses and laughter. The lady with the poodle landed on the two large bus passengers, who were still discussing boxing.

A man screamed in a harsh, wailing note. A thunderous sound of crashing metal, plastic and glass came from down the block, shaking the sidewalk and rattling the glass of the bus shelters. Police sirens sounded in the distance.

Without looking back, Michael knew he had been lucky. Gravitational flux was a major cause of hundreds of accidental deaths every year, according to the All States polls.

His right shin hurt like hell and his forearm was scraped but not bleeding. Michael noted with disdain that he had scraped the elbow of his lucky maroon shirt. He brushed off the front of his pants, rose, assured his side satchel was still strung over his left shoulder, and walked toward the office.

• • •

"Good day, Mr. Atkinson," said the man behind the desk. He had a receding hairline and a watermelon-shaped head. "I'm Jeremiah Steiner. Have a seat."

Michael entered the office doorway. Steiner stood, one large hand on the back of his brush cut, his other hand out, indicating the chairs in front of him. He wore a baby-blue suit, a mustard-yellow dress shirt, and a thin, orange tie with a narrow metal clip.

Michael thanked him. They shook hands perfunctorily, and Michael sat in the chair on the right.

An impressive window took up the entire wall behind the desk, showcasing a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Rows of glassy buildings marched in all directions. The streets 15 stories below bustled with traffic and pedestrians the sizes of ants. To the left was a brown, 20-storey, box-shaped building with a logo, "Intel HR", in large, thick, white letters at the top. To the right stood a row of skyscrapers whose silvery windows reflected the blue sky. In the distance, beyond the buildings, stood Parliament Hill. Behind that, the rolling hills of

Hullatineau faded into the cobalt-coloured horizon.

A tall, oak bookcase with rows of hardcover books with golden lettering on the spines stood to the left of Steiner's desk. A mini-fridge stood in the other corner, along with a small magazine-and-newspaper-cluttered table and two chairs.

"So, Michael—is it okay if I call you that?" Steiner asked.

"Uh, yes," Michael said quickly.

Steiner sat down, rubbed his palms together, and stared intently at him.

"Good. Care for anything to drink? Don't be shy to speak up; I'm a little hard of hearing."

"No thank you," said Michael.

"Suit yourself," said Steiner, reaching across the oak desk for a coffee mug. An aqua-coloured pad lay in front of him, a phone to the left. In and Out files sat side-by-side on the right. A pile of manila folders and papers sat in the middle. Beside the phone stood a large, ornately framed photograph facing outward; Steiner beamed, wearing a short-sleeved shirt, his thick arm around a beaming woman with unnaturally orange hair, heavy red lipstick, and tight, black leather pants.

Steiner inhaled deeply, put his hands on the desk, scanning the papers quickly and, Michael thought, for the first time. After a moment, Steiner looked up again.

Michael was aware of silence, the smell of cigarettes and a cloying, musky cologne from the 1980s, a vintage brand named Brut.

"Why do you want to work for us?" Steiner asked. "What are some of the skills you can offer Time Company Incorporated?"

"My communications contracts have involved creating products, organizing events, raising the profiles of organizations, updating systems," Michael said. "Between that and my financial and legal credentials, I have a lot to offer."

"A lot to offer," Steiner replied.

Michael was unsure whether his tone was mockery.

The man behind the desk nodded, his bulbous chin trying to escape from his tight collar. His bloated, pink face had a shaving nick just below the right ear. "You know what we do here, Mr. Acheson?"

"Atkinson."

"Acherson," replied Steiner. "You are aware of the power we try to

harness and adapt?" He raised a bushy eyebrow that had more hair than the top of his head. The rest of Steiner's hair had long since retreated to the back and sides in thin, brown strands.

Michael cleared his throat, keeping his voice and nerves steady. Steiner made him nervous.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I have an interest, a very great interest, in stabilizing the space-time continuum. I hear you people are the best. I want to be part of your team."

Michael gestured with his right hand as though signing his signature in thin air. "I can work independently and as a team player, and juggle several tasks simultaneously in a fast-paced environment under tight deadlines and amid changing priorities. It's a good fit."

Michael shrank back as though expecting a blow for his stock, job-description-matching statement.

"Trying to harness the space-time continuum?" Steiner asked rhetorically. "To stabilize it?" He covered his chin with his right hand. "Huh-hmmm!"

"Yes," Michael said hesitantly, more a question than affirmation.

Steiner guffawed loudly and cruelly and raised his palms. There was a spot of dried blood on his right hand from his shaving nick.

"Mr. Ackerley, as you are no doubt aware, we always keep our appointments. Unlike an interviewee who arrives 20 minutes late." He nodded toward a clock above the table to his left. The hands were stuck at 11:10.

Michael looked at his digital watch. It read 10:52. The clock's hand must have risen with the loss of gravity, he thought. When he looked at Steiner, Michael opened his mouth but the interviewer continued.

"We always stick to our schedules, even if the flux goes up and down 12 times a day. Even if time jumps from now to the medieval age, into the futuristic, I don't know, Hyper-Industrial Revolution. We are the Time Company, Mr. Acheson." He paused for drama, sounding like an old general in a film giving a monologue before a final battle. Michael was struck by his resemblance to Walter C. Scott. "And we want to control the ebb and flow of these changes. That is the aim of our market."

Steiner rubbed his palms together, making a sound of gritting

sandpaper. "Our job is not to stabilize. No, not at all. Do you know why?"

Michael thought quickly, watching the two thick, gold rings on Mr. Steiner's index and middle finger.

"Because that would be bad for business?" Michael asked.

Steiner laughed quickly, derisively. "Bad for business?" His smile vanished like the sun behind a cloud. He leaned forward, clearing his papers to one side. "No! That would be apocalyptic for business. Someone has to pick up the pieces. Someone has to keep paid services running. Someone has to make sure people keep paying, even if oxygen suddenly runs out. In fact, if oxygen does run out, send in the Oxygen Men and standardize the Global Positioning Price of oxygen!"

He straightened. There was spittle on the aqua note pad. Steiner's breath stank of avocado.

Michael leaned away.

"We have to adapt," Steiner continued. "Time will not adapt to us. I just met a young hotshot the other day, a fellow by the name of Ryan Daniel. He goes from town to town reviving dying Christian youth organizations. A self-made man in Europe. Doesn't get intimidated even if it's suddenly the Stone Age, or space aliens join the group. He's an example of what a young man—what you—can make of yourself in this day and age."

Steiner paused for a reaction, saw none forthcoming, and continued.

"Do you know how many parameters provide the conditions for human life, Mr. Anderson?"

"I believe there are 32," Michael replied, his stomach clenching. He wanted to fiddle with something with his restless hands.

A toothy smile broke out on Steiner's face, but was not complimentary. "Very good. Thirty-two conditions that make it possible for all of us to live—for you and I to sit here and chat, for Granny to get young Tommy to deliver her groceries. If one of these were to change—just one—as all other constants have altered and sporadically shifted for nearly 50 years, ever since the last lovable Pope passed on, we wouldn't say 'Boo' before dying in our sleep, on the bus, at work, or driving. We would get swept away, back to the dust where we all came from."

Steiner inhaled, exhaled and drank from his mug.

Michael smelled either cough medicine or bad vodka.

A pen floated from Steiner's desk and toward Michael. A few sheets of paper followed, seemingly in pursuit. Michael rose, but Steiner raised his right hand.

"Leave it," Steiner said, watching him coldly.

Michael snatched the pen from the air. It was a heavy, gold-encased ball-point pen imprinted with the Time logo. The logo blurred and changed to *Domtar Pulp and Paper Mill*. Michael's eyes grew. He looked up as the papers rose toward the speckle-patterned ceiling.

"I said *leave* it," Steiner repeated.

Michael fought a last urge to grab them and sat down.

Steiner crossed his arms. "What do you think of that, Mr. Atlinson?"

Unsure whether he meant the floating papers or the company philosophy, Michael hedged his bets.

"It's good," replied Michael, replacing the pen on the desk under Steiner's studying gaze. "If change persists, then we have to be ready for it."

Steiner unfolded his arms, put his elbows on the desk, made a steeple shape with his fingers and stared over them at Michael. After a moment, he grunted and spoke.

"I don't think that this job is for you, Mr. Averson," he said, as though discussing the weather. "In this business, we seize opportunity, harness opportunity. You would rather see the potentially disastrous conditions gone, along with the golden opportunity."

Michael was speechless. He felt a pressure unlocking in his ears, as he always had before one of the universal constants changed in the space-time continuum. He had discovered years ago that many people did not have this same reaction to the shifting conditions of life, and so kept this ability to himself. Michael had lived his entire life under the Changing Thirty-Two Conditions, from different centuries merging with the current century to oxygen becoming carbon monoxide during one of the more perilous moments. The last thing he needed was this ape, Steiner, sermonizing about a fact of life that Michael had always endured.

He felt a horrific, stabbing ear ache. Between Michael's clenched stomach, sweaty palms, fidgeting hands and dry mouth, this painful episode was the last thing he needed in this job interview or moreover,

lecture. The space-time continuum might be controllable, and people might try to capitalize on its unexpected changes, but he had his doubts—especially about leaving the matter in the hands of dumb, middle-aged white men in suits. He suspected that was how it all started with the space debris.

As this insight flashed through Michael's mind, he covered both ears with his hands.

"It's the way things are," said Steiner, watching Michael with curiosity. "Some of us aren't meant for greater things. I'm sure you'll find something suitable for someone with your, ah, skills."

Incoherent sounds, including roars, explosions, and inhuman cries, rose up from outside. Michael's stomach turned. He looked past Steiner to the city. The Hullatineau Hills were gone. Where they should have been, two jagged, towering volcanoes spouted bursts of red lava under a slate-grey sky. Dome-shaped mountains, a mix of tropical green and feces brown, surrounded the volcanoes. The terrible, loudening noises were drifting over from this jungle.

What Michael presumed was an airplane flew from the hills and over the city. The plane, though, had wide, flapping wings, a long, sharp beak, and round, sharp talons. The flying creature drifted just right of the Parliament tower and disappeared from sight.

"Mr. Steiner—," Michael said, but Steiner cut him off.

"—Mr. Adleson, you're just not cut out for this business."

Michael felt panic hit him in a flash not unlike lightning. He rose, knocked his seat backward, and quickly retreated towards the door.

Michael had never seen a pterodactyl in real life, so when it came into view again, his blood froze. His temples pounded. The creature unleashed a high, ear-splitting cry that reverberated off the walls of the skyscraper canyon. Other creatures, invisible from the vantage point of the window, roared and mewled in the distance. The sounds from the streets below told their terrible stories. There was a smashing sound louder than that of a car falling from the sky. There was a whoosh from an explosion. Screams carried on the wind. Flames burst halfway up the side of the Intel building.

Steiner was still talking.

"... Mr. Achleson," he said, rising to his feet. He watched Michael open the office door. "There's no need to take things so hard. I'm sure there are sanitary cleaning employers who would be happy to enlist

your particular services. But I would appreciate it if you would not take my pen with you."

"What?" Michael said, too busy watching the northern sky roil and listening to the sounds echo across the downtown core. A lime-green tail about 20 feet long swung out from behind the Excel building, below the enflamed floor. Two more pterodactyls circled the Parliament tower, chasing each other like children in a game of tag. They soared toward Steiner's building and overhead in a rush of wind. The glass rattled in its frame. A car honked repeatedly below. An alarm shrieked.

"Please return the pen, Mr. Aversyon," Mr. Steiner said. He stood stoically, refusing to face the chaos behind him. "It's merely another shift in the space-time continuum. There's nothing like the Dinosaur Age to liven up your schedule."

Michael looked down at the golden pen. He held it in a white-knuckled grip in his right hand. He looked back up at the window. A pterodactyl soared into the canyon of skyscrapers. It flapped its wings the size of tarpaulins with a sound of thunder. As it passed the window, Michael saw its fungus-green hide the texture of leather, and its beady, yellow eyes with black pupils.

"My name is Michael Atinkson, you sorry, sanctimonious, son of a bitch," Michael said. "Here's your pen!"

Steiner's face dropped. His fat chin resembled a bobbing apple.

Michael threw the pen at him. The pen flipped through the air, caught a glint of sunlight, and bounced off the space between Steiner's eyes.

The nearby pterodactyl returned to view, passing from left to right, then veering toward the window. The light from the pen reflected off its cocked, soccer-ball-sized eye. The creature vanished from sight.

Steiner teetered backward, stunned and confused, his eyes closed and his mouth slack.

The deafening sound of giant, thrashing wings came from down the street.

Michael, having seen the winged creatures circle the tower and pass twice, saw with clarity what was happening. It's circling the block, he thought, a cold sensation in his gut, and coming back for another pass.

He stifled a scream and opened the door behind him. Steiner

rubbed his own forehead.

“Run!” said Michael.

Steiner blinked and watched, blank-eyed. “Don’t be afraid of change, son,” he said.

Michael slammed the door.

He ran past the spacious reception lobby to the two elevators in the nearby hallway and hit the “Down” button between the doorways repeatedly. The doors opened. Michael leapt in, threw himself back to the wall and screwed his eyes shut. The doors shut with a skidding sound. The elevator descended.

He was out of breath and his heart was still running a sprint even though he had stopped.

The orchestral sound of glass shattering in Steiner’s fifteenth-floor office did not occur until the elevator had descended two more floors. Someone yodeled in pain. Plaster clattered the top of the elevator with a sound like hailstones.

Michael was hyperventilating. The elevator descended. The sounds continued distantly, a heavy object bouncing off the roof every few seconds. Someone gripped his shoulder with warm, strong, reassuring fingers. He opened his eyes, heart hammering.

Michael turned to see a tall, black man with long dreadlocks standing in front of the elevator panel. The stranger removed his yellow headphones with his free hand. He looked at Michael imploringly with dark blue eyes.

“It will be okay,” he said calmly. The stranger cocked his ear as though about to shake water out of it. He looked up and squinted one eye. “Yes, it will be okay now.” He nodded repeatedly.

Michael recognized the gesture and noticed the stranger’s long, dark sideburns and trim goatee. Michael’s face must have given him away; the man produced a card from the back pocket of his jeans and handed it over.

“I knew it,” the stranger said. A wide, friendly grin spread on his face. “You were on the bus today. Call this number when you’re ready. There are a lot of us out here.”

Michael looked at the card as the elevator reached bottom.

A “ding” sounded. The doors opened. He looked up as the man removed his hand from Michael’s shoulder and stepped out, still smiling.

“Knew what?” Michael asked, baffled.

“That you were one of us. It’s a look you get with the conditions. We see the conditions coming, and we think we can probably even stop them.”

“But that would mean that people could control—” Michael began.

The stranger nodded slowly. “Call us. See for yourself. That is, if you’re ready for a change from—” He nodded upward with a mock grimace, meaning the office building. “—this.”

Michael stared at him, the unspoken words from his own reply still on his lips.

“I knew it,” the stranger said, disappearing into the crowded, tumultuous lobby.

Michael scurried out past four tall, wide-shouldered firemen who inspected the elevator. He drifted outside through the jostling work crowd, which was also intent on leaving.

What did he mean? thought Michael. It had always felt like he was on the outside, broke, over-skilled, and unable to find work. It had felt like Michael would never find work. Putting the beige business card, which had only an eight-digit number typed in large, black figures, in his front pocket, he looked up and ended his self-pity.

A long fire truck blocked one end of the block. Just past the rig, an overturned car had impaled the side of a bus head-first. Flames licked up from the centre of the bus. A team of firefighters surrounded the accident, barking orders and aiming a hose at the blaze from either side. Paramedics carried people away on stretchers to waiting ambulances with flashing lights. Shattered glass covered the rest of the block, crunching under rushing feet. He didn’t have to look up to know where the glass had come from.

Michael looked in the other direction. A red-brick, four-storey apartment building had a circular hole in the corner between the third and fourth floor. Chunks of brick, wood and plastic littered the intersection below. A white fridge was visible in the apartment, covered with magnets shaped like lady bugs, as well as multi-coloured sheets of paper. Across from the fridge stood a bookcase covered with chunks of brick, plaster and wood.

The birds of prey had done their damage here, too, Michael thought. He felt strangely disappointed to know the sources of all the

noise he had heard while in Steiner's office. Deciding he was only mildly concerned about what must have happened to Steiner, Michael walked toward the damaged apartment building.

The sounds of sirens, spraying water, yells and moans carried over the street in a pastiche of controlled chaos. A light spray permeated the humid block—part ash, part water and part debris. Michael coughed dryly. People scurried past. A Chinese man in a bomber vest stumbled into him and looked up, showing the rings beneath his eyes. He mumbled to himself before lurching away, his paunchy face streaked with dirt and tears.

"It will be okay," Michael said, but the man was much further down the block already.

With that statement, Michael realized what his job was. His problem had always been looking in the wrong places. Time to get home, Michael thought. I've got work to do. •

Morocco: Djemaa el-Fna

Claire Litton

A heavy feeling of unease,
like a slow sugar trickle from some narcotic source:
a tree tapped by a stealthy hand
that also sneaks through bags
in search of a sacred voice, a word.

(Your will be done.)

When minarets howl across the sky
like dogs run over by motorcycles,
the city stirs and turns over in its sleep.

Straw houses roll across the low horizon,
their forgotten limbs scratched and bent and broken.

Thousands of eyes look to the East in dreams,
while someone's mother walks to the open door
and sees the sun lighten the trees like bones
like skin, like her own body's sweet brownness.

The smell of mint is an unwanted kiss,
someone's tongue down an unsuspecting throat,
and the old men sit and laugh with open mouths
that gape and slide sideways in talk.

The young men take a predatory trail,
eyes stern with unfelt passion,
slitting the young lamb's throat without a sigh
in the woven marketplace.

(Your eyes on me.
Your hands on me.
Your life on me.)

This fitful glance, this swelling pity, this
open flame a hawk-man carries
to the woman who sits on a low stool
bartering "hello!" in a language
not her own.

The braid of your hair carries its own scent
beyond the stench of desperation that
manifests as hectic color:
the name of the city means red
and the tea that smells of ginseng
gleams like a jewel in the fire.

To look down on the streets at night
means you have ice in your drink,
that your sleeves are long enough to avoid disdain,
that your waist is fat with nestled cash,
that your tongue slips and spatters
the words like hissing fat.

Some child somewhere drags a cat by the tail
past an underground oven,
keening in a voice thin as a reed
"Dirham, dirham, dirham". •



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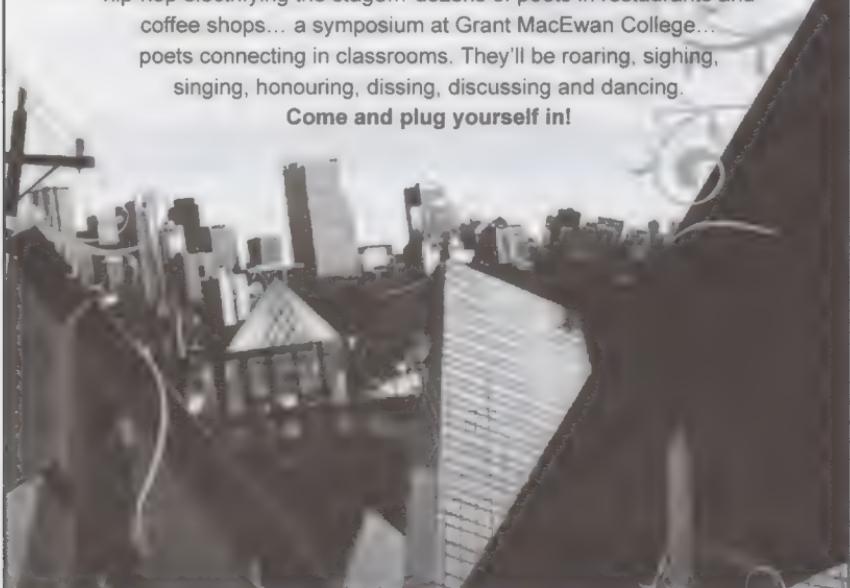
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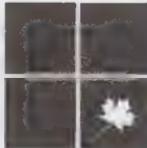
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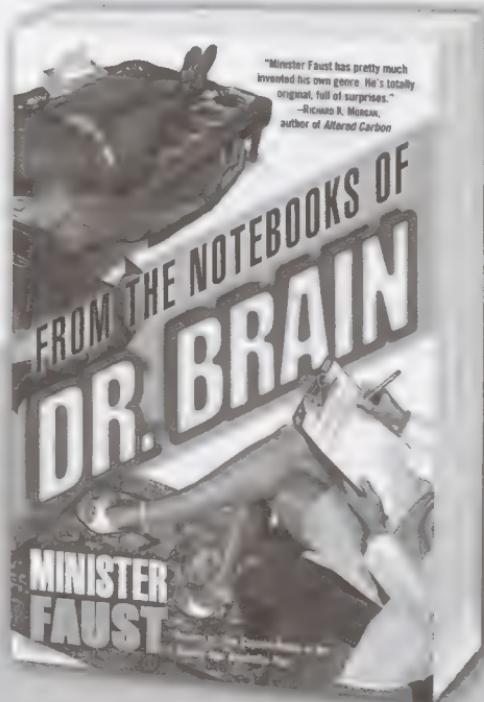
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about our contributors

Leslie Brown is a research technician working in the Alzheimer's field. She has previously published stories in *On Spec* and in several anthologies including *Open Space*, *Thou Shall Not*, *Loving the Undead* and the upcoming *Sails and Sorcery*. She is a member of Lyngarde, an Ottawa Writers' Group.

Julia Campbell-Such is an MA student in the department of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal. She studies apocalyptic thinking.

Claire Litton has been writing since she was three years old and made her first book by stapling construction paper together. She is a professional belly dancer and life drawing model, and enjoys watching movies that are so bad, they're good. She loves all things science fiction, and thinks Joss Whedon is god.

Catherine MacLeod: After years of wondering, Catherine MacLeod recently found out why Billy Joe McAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

Will McIntosh has sold stories to *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Postscripts*, *CHIZINE*, and many other venues. His story *Soft Apocalypse* was a finalist for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards for best short story of 2005. He is currently at work on a novel set in the Soft Apocalypse world. He wrote *Perfect Violet* while a student at the Clarion Science Fiction Writer's Workshop. By day he is a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University.

Joanne Merriam is a Nova Scotian living in New Hampshire with her husband and two easily annoyed rabbits, Bob and Doug. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Southern Gothic* and previously in *On Spec*, and is forthcoming in *Asimov's*. Her poetry collection *The Glaze from Breaking* (Stride, 2005) is available in the UK and online via her web site at www.joannemerriam.com.

James Moran's fiction has appeared in *Algonquin Roundtable Review*

and the *Peter F. Yacht Club*. Moran's poetry has appeared in the *Bywords Quarterly Journal*, *Spire Poetry Poster*, *Another Toronto Quarterly*, *The Haldimand Press*, and the *Peter F. Yacht Cub*, *dig* and *Blue Moon Magazine*. A freelance journalist, he has published work via *CBC Radio*, *the Ottawa Citizen*, *Canadian Wildlife Magazine*, *Capital Xtra*, *the Montreal Gazette*, and literary magazines including the *Antigonish Review*, *the Maisonneuve* website and *Matrix*. James Moran lives in Ottawa with his wife, the poet and editor Anita Dolman. *Living Under the Conditions* marks his first sold short story.

Susan Owen Kagan studied drawing and painting at the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1976, and at the University of Western Ontario in 1980/81. She received a BFA with Honours in Sculpture from the University of Alberta in 1984. She has since forged a successful career as a sculptor; her work has been included in many prestigious exhibitions and can be found in public and private collections across Canada. Owen Kagan has also completed several private and publicly-funded commissions, including the concrete exterior panels for the Markin/CNRL Engineering building at the University of Alberta, and the Edmonton Holocaust Memorial, which is located on the grounds of the Alberta Legislature. This issue's cover sculpture resides at the permanent sculpture garden at Beaver Flats Pottery, 7609 115 Street, in Edmonton. See her website at www.susanowenkagan.com.

Gary Pierluigi was an ex-journalist and Social Services Worker who, in 1996, became a quadriplegic. He has been published in numerous Literary Journals, including *Queen's Quarterly*, *CV2*, and *Quills*. He was short listed for the 2006 *CBC Literary Awards*, and received an honourable mention in the Ontario Poetry Society's *Open Heart* Contest. He currently has a poetry collection under review for possible publication, and is completing a book of short stories. He now writes full time.

Cat Sparks lives on the sunny south coast of New South Wales, Australia, where she works as a graphic designer and runs *Agog! Press* with her partner, author Robert Hood. In 2004 she was a graduate of the inaugural Clarion South Writers' Workshop and an *L. Ron*

Hubbard's Writers of the Future prizewinner. Since 2000 she has published forty stories and received eight Australian SF awards. She recently became a member of SFWA.

Michael Vance lives and writes out of Ontario, Canada. His work has appeared in *On Spec*, and the *Tesseracts* anthology series.

In upcoming issues... Great new fiction by Bryn Neuenschwander, Angela Slatter, Marissa Gritter, Rose Hunter, Scott Mackay, Liz Shannon Miller, Jack Skillingstead, Chandra Rooney, Leah Bobet, Hannah Strom-Martin, Greg Wilson, Trevor Morrison, Steve Sneyd and Saint James Harris Wood. Great new poetry by Claire Litton, I.B. Iskov, Gary Pierluigi, David Livingstone Clink, Randy Schroeder, Leah Bobet, Saint James Harris Wood, Evan Hazenberg, Desi Di Nardo, Angela Slatter, and many more.

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